Desifying Shakespeare: Performing Contemporary India in Adaptations

Taarini Mookherjee

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy under the Executive Committee of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2020
Abstract

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“Desifying Shakespeare” focuses on the sharp spike in Shakespeare performances in India in the last three decades (1993-2018), a period of time that coincides with the advent of globalization, the liberalization of India’s economy, and the emergence of the field of Global Shakespeare. By mobilizing the bilingual portmanteau desify, a word that simultaneously references the abstract and aspirational nation (des) and the quotidian process of making local or native in popular culture, this project argues that these self-consciously Indian productions or “desified Shakespeare” disclose contemporary Indian ideas and inquiries of the nation. The dissertation thus works to demonstrate the discursive overlaps and tensions between race, caste, religion, gender, language, color, and nationality, categories that are historically contingent, fluid, and performative.

Each chapter centers around the affordances and appropriations of a different Shakespeare play and its iterations in contemporary India: Romeo and Juliet and the neighborhood as nation, Othello and the performativity of caste, Hamlet and the borderlands, Twelfth Night and diaspora space. “Desifying Shakespeare” thus marks the overlap and tension between the intensely local, the triumphantly national, and the universally global. Over the past two decades, the rise of the Hindu Right in India has resulted in Indian public discourse marking a return to and renewed investigation of the nation and its paronyms: national and nationalism. While the Hindu Right propounds a triumphalist and homogenous narrative of the nation, “Desifying Shakespeare” troubles this narrative by turning to performance, which I argue
negotiates the tension between the des or the nation and desifying or the process of making local, concepts that both overlap and oppose each other. Prior studies on Shakespeare in India have relied heavily on the consequences of Shakespearean adaptations’ colonial origins, often restricted to analyses of single productions. However, “Desifying Shakespeare” shifts, in its methodology, to emphasize a synoptic view of Shakespeare in India, its multiple vectors of influence—colonial, global, postcolonial, and transnational—and its diverse areas of overlap. While the tendency within the field of Global Shakespeare is to dismiss the nation in favor of the local and the transnational, this project argues that the local and the transnational are entwined in the contemporary notions of the nation.

“Desifying Shakespeare” works to provide an alternative theorization of adaptation by using the portmanteau desify—a word that performs the very action it describes. A combination of des, the Hindi word for country/nation (implicitly understood to mean Indian), and the English suffix “—fy” denoting the transformation or the process of making into, desify is itself a word that desifies the English for change. An analysis of desification, thus involves a shift from a privileging of the putative original to an approach that considers a wider web of influences spanning different media, genres, languages, and sources. Running through this dissertation is a theorization of language in performance, moving between the concepts of neighboring, regional, vernacular, and dialect. “Desifying Shakespeare” thus shifts away from the dominant post-colonial metaphors of narration and imagination to emphasize the role of embodied performance in determining and upending a national identity. How the des is constructed in these productions provides an alternative to a neat narrative of the nation that moves beyond the Indian context to provide a model for Global Shakespeare criticism more broadly.
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Acknowledgments

In many ways this dissertation is both precisely the one I planned to write and one that has been dramatically shaped at every step by the feedback I received, the different models of scholarship I encountered, and the various, often far-flung, communities that supported and encouraged me. To the members of my dissertation committee—W.B. Worthen, Brent Edwards, and Shayoni Mitra—I owe a debt of gratitude for pushing me to be a more thoughtful and focused close reader. A special thanks is also due to Denise Cruz, Jean Howard, Julie Peters and all the members of the theatre colloquium who read iterations of this dissertation at various stages and were always generous and perceptive readers. The germ of this dissertation began during my MA at King’s College London and it was the encouraging feedback I received from Gordon McMullan that propelled me into a PhD. Farah Karim-Cooper, and everyone I had the privilege of interning with at Shakespeare’s Globe, gave me my first extended experience with Shakespeare in all his multilingual glory.

Over my seven years at Columbia University, more people have had an impact on my intellectual growth than I can possibly name here. This dissertation would never have been completed without the infrastructural, caffeinated, and personal support I received at the Writing Center, Nous Café, the Center for Teaching and Learning, Joe’s Coffee, the GSAS Writing Studio and, of course, within the English department. My fellow Literature Humanities preceptors provided me with an intellectual community unlike any I had previously encountered, and my brilliant students challenged my thinking, structured my weeks, and cheered my
achievements. Anastasia Kirtiklis, by far the best teacher I encountered at Columbia, taught me yoga that strengthened my mind, my body, and my sense of self.

My fellow graduate students have not only provided me with models of exceptional scholarship but, more importantly, models of exceptional friendship. Without them my life would be immeasurably poorer. My adoptive theatre cohort, Buck Wanner and Julia Sirmons, are so much more than writing buddies and without whose physical and virtual presence I would have not finished writing. Hilary Donadio taught me that being soft-spoken and having strong convictions are not mutually exclusive. Noémie Ndiaye is the woman to whose heights I aspire. Warren Kluber consumed the products of stress baking, changed all the lightbulbs, and was an all-round great companion for all the milestones of this degree. It is only fitting that we defended on the same day. Most importantly, Charlotte Silverman believed in my dissertation without actually reading a word of it and left me in peace just long enough to actually write it.

This dissertation relied heavily on archival research that was completed over a period of several months in the UK and India. To the exceptional creative artists and directors whose work inspired my research—Atul Kumar, Vishal Bhardwaj, Aparna Sen, Sunil Shanbag, and Tom Bird—thank you for taking the time to meet with me and responding to my unending questions. To the librarians and staff at the National School of Drama, Natarang Pratishtan, the National Centre for Performing Arts, Natya Shodh Sansthan, the British Library, and Shakespeare’s Globe—your help with my research was invaluable. A special thanks is due to the Satwalekar and Mitter families for housing, feeding, and entertaining me over this period. Over the course of the last four years, I’ve been a part of a host of academic conferences around the world and owe my thanks to the participants and members of the Harvard Mellon School for Theatre and Performance, the Shakespeare Association of America, the Asian Shakespeare Association, and
the Women and Indian Shakespeares conference for providing me with always valuable feedback on my work.

To my friends, Boishakhi Dutt, Sayan Chaudhuri, Chinmay Sharma, Sarah Farooqui, Achala Upendran, Winnie Mitra, Budhaditya Bhattacharya, and Shreya Jindal, thank you for listening to me rave about teaching and drone on about this project, for giving me your views on contemporary Indian politics, for your company at protests, and for all the last-minute international help with translation. To my wonderful flatmates from around the world—Archana Raja, Jennifer Lei, Alan Flood, and Theo Morrissey—I am proud to call you friends and not just people I had to live with. To every person who makes Lovelock Street home, thank you for keeping the home fires burning.

I have an astoundingly wonderful, chaotic, and massive family—all of whom take, and deserve, credit for this dissertation. Throughout my academic career I’ve been lucky to live in cities with close family nearby which gave me the opportunity to shape different and personal bonds with people I’ve known all my life. Rajiv and Anju Basu, my support system in New York, could always be counted on for great food and even better company. Nikhil Basu always knew when I needed a long chat about everything and nothing. Shouri and Juni Mookherjee, my support system in New Delhi, gave me a home away from home and a never-ending source of entertainment. My cousins, Pia, Rai, and Dhrubo, gave me, often unasked for, glimpses into the minds of undergraduate students. My extended family and friends-who-are-family all round the world are too many to count, but an extra special shout out is due to Raksha Mirchandani and her girls, Ramona Lall and her boys, and Uma Milner and her boys for the welcome breaks from reality, and to Harry and June Streets for being an extra set of grandparents.
I was lucky enough to know and love three great-grandmothers who were all strong and unabashedly opinionated women. They would say, quite rightly, that their genes take credit for this first doctorate in the family. To my grandparents—Jolu Mookherjee, who gave me my first Bengali dictionary, Lily Mookherjee, who taught me the power of storytelling, Champak Basu, who showed me the intricacies of good writing, and Monu Basu, who introduced me to Shakespeare—your influence permeates this project.

My parents, Srila and Gopal Mookherjee, introduced me to, and encouraged a love for, theatre, literature, and healthy debate. Most importantly, they are the sort of people who value and nurture their family and friends, and, despite my anti-social tendencies, I have benefited more than anyone from this. It is because of this that I’ve always had a home and people to turn to, no matter where in the world I am. Their love and support have been unwavering and absolute. Last, but not least, I must thank my sister, Yamini Mookherjee, for being my personal ice-breaker, whether physically present or not, in every social situation for the past twenty-eight years. Your unconditional and transparent pride in everything that I do made every step of this journey that much easier.
Dedication

For Monu Basu

My favorite person

Shakespearean extraordinaire

Connoisseur of languages, cultures, music, food, and pun-tastic jokes.

He was a man, take him for all in all;

I shall not look upon his like again.
Introduction: Desifying Shakespeare

A cursory Google search of the term “desify” reveals recipes for shitake mushroom masala, menus that contain chicken tikka pizza, fashion tips and tricks to convert dresses into colorful Indian wedding finery, or examples of the quintessential Indian jugaad or innovative hack. In all these examples desify is the term used to describe the process by which the strange, the foreign, and the seemingly incompatible are made familiar, local, and apposite. Desification is thus a concept that remains squarely a part of the quotidian, the performative, and the colloquial, and to desify something is to make it Indian, to make it local, to make it popular, to make it palatable. The process is one that happens on the ground—in kitchens, homes, and streets. It is not in the grand ceremonies and elaborate rituals that accompany public proclamations of cross-cultural contact but rather is inherent in that small action of adding green chilies and coriander leaves to a pasta dish, of adding a Hindi prefix to an English word.

The word itself performs the very action it describes, a portmanteau of des, the Hindi word for country/nation (implicitly understood to mean Indian), and the English suffix “—fy” denoting the transformation or the process of making into, desify is itself a word that desifies the English for change. While the word desi refers to India, a monolithic imposing entity, and particularly for diasporic communities, a notion of the homeland that is infused with a sense of nostalgia—it is both the abstract and aspirational image of the country and the determining and restricting truth of India—the word desify troubles this homogenizing and governing move. Desify while inextricably tied to an idea of India serves simultaneously to describe the small, individual and incremental changes that form part of the process of making local that are often at odds with that very idea of India. Des (nation/India), desi (Indian/local), and desify (to make

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Indian/local/popular), however all necessarily exist in relation to another entity: the firangi, the foreign, the other.

Recent Indian adaptations of Shakespeare have been frequently touted in the press as “desi Shakespeare” or “Shakespeare going desi.” These descriptions suggest an added flavor, a localizing move that absorbs and modifies Shakespeare without completely transforming it. These descriptions bear a resemblance to other productions across the globe that have been proclaimed as local, native, or indigenous Shakespeare, that similarly retain a Shakespearean “essence” while ostensibly being transplanted into a different culture or environment. Since the inception of the field of Global Shakespeare in the late twentieth century, there has been a concerted debate over nomenclature—are these productions local, global, indigenous, native, foreign, international, transnational, or intercultural? To these identifiers I add the terms desi and desify as particularly important descriptors for the self-contained and self-consciously “Indian” field of Shakespeare productions that comprise the subject matter of this project. While desify occupies adjacent territory to other expansively theorized terms of mixture and mingling—hybridity, bricolage, creolité to name a few—it is a more provocative and productive term for this project for three reasons. First, the word for the nation is contained within the term itself; second, it works as a descriptor of both process and product; third, desify is an ambiguous term that encompasses the national and the local/popular and the tension between the two.

There is a history of Shakespeare’s presence in India that suggests the impossibility of desifying Shakespeare, an icon associated with English literature and a colonial education, perhaps best exemplified by the maiden Merchant Ivory film Shakespeare Wallah (1965) set in newly Independent India. At the end of the film, Lizzie, a young English touring actress, boards a ship to leave India, “returning to a home” she has never known and leaving behind her lover,
Sanju, an Indian playboy and gentleman at leisure. Given the binaries that the film has ostensibly set up between the classically trained theatre actress, Lizzie, and the popular film diva, Manjula, and correspondingly between a pervasive nostalgia for pre-Independence audiences who genuinely understood and appreciated Shakespeare and the temptation presented by the colorful, musical and modern film industry, it appears that Lizzie’s departure also marks the departure of Shakespeare and English theatre from India, making way for Bollywood and its entertainment of the masses. The end of the film thus seems to explicitly mark the end of the colonial Raj and the emergence of the postcolonial nation.¹

However, as Lizzie stands on the deck of the ship waving goodbye to her parents, we are provided with a fleeting flashback. Lizzie, in a dimly lit room, plays the piano, singing the foundational eight notes of Western music as she plays: “Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do.” Sanju walks up behind her and leaning over plays the same eight notes in reverse, singing the foundational eight notes of Indian classical music: “Sa Ni Dha Pa Ma Ga Re Sa.” This short episode undercuts the notion that the film forwards a split between the colonial and the postcolonial, the English and the Indian, suggesting instead a common core of shared humanity that surpasses cultural difference. The ensuing history of Shakespeare’s presence in postcolonial India has been one that has had to constantly negotiate this tension between the foreign and the

¹ Several scholars have since questioned the historical accuracy of this enforced split, pointing to Shakespeare’s prominent role in the inception of Hindi film, as well as the striking parallels between the functioning of the early modern theatre industry and the contemporary Indian film industry. For extended analyses of Shakespeare Wallah see Nandi Bhatia, “Imperialistic Representation and Spectatorial Reception in Shakespeare Wallah;” Lubna Chaudhry and Saba Khattak, “Images of White Women and Indian Nationalism: Ambivalent Representations in Shakespeare Wallah and Junoon;” Dan Venning, “Cultural Imperialism and Intercultural Encounter in Merchant Ivory’s Shakespeare Wallah;” Valerie Wayne, “Shakespeare Wallah and Colonial Specularity;” Richard Burt, “All that remains of Shakespeare in Indian film;” Parmita Kapadia, “Bollywood battles the Bard: The Evolving Relationship between Film and Theater in Shakespeare Wallah;”
universal—Shakespeare as emblematic of British literature and Shakespeare as a universal and accessible source text.

My dissertation draws on the two strands that Shakespeare Wallah brings up: the notion that Shakespeare does not lend itself to desification as appears to ostensibly be demonstrated in the plot of the film, and the subtle suggestions throughout the film of the possibility of cultural hybridity. This is perhaps most prominent in the title of the film where wallah, a Hindi word for a person associated with or selling something, has been absorbed into the English language. While the plot of the film suggests that this unusual amalgam—desi Shakespeare—could never exist, its hybrid and desified title implicitly suggests otherwise. The history of Shakespeare in India began in the late eighteenth century with the arrival of colonialism and covers the inclusion of the plays in college curricula that furthered the British imperialist agenda, the incorporation of

Figure 1 Sanju and Lizzie playing the "universal" foundational eight notes of music

4
the plays in the repertoires of local, folk, and hybrid performance traditions, and the growing prominence of the plays as source texts for the national and regional film industries. If searched for, Shakespeare now crops up in a multitude of places and languages of desi life, from street signs to politician’s insults, from landmark court judgments to Bollywood songs. Thus, while Shakespeare first entered the Indian consciousness through the classroom and the stage, accessibly largely only to the educated elite, his presence across a wide swathe of contemporary popular culture reflects the depth and range of his desification, belying Shakespeare Wallah’s central proposition. In this dissertation, I focus on a very small slice of this desi Shakespeare, limiting its scope to contemporary adaptations in film and theatre.

Research into this project began with the question: why do contemporary Indian adaptations of Shakespeare acknowledge their debt to and embrace the label of Shakespeare given a long history of doing precisely the opposite? I suggest that the answer to this question lies in the convergence of three circumstances in the early nineties. First, the liberalization of India’s economy in 1993 that shifted its position in the world, more specifically in terms of cultural flows in and out of the country. Second, the rise of Hindu right-wing fundamentalism in India, bursting onto the national stage with the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, the ensuing all-India riots and the Bharatiya Janatiya Party emerging, for the first time, as the single largest party in the national elections of 1996. Third, the rise of Global Shakespeare as a subfield

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2 See Vikram Singh Thakur’s article “Where art thou, Shakespeare?” in The Hindu for an overview of this range of references.

of academic criticism in Shakespeare studies, with Dennis Kennedy’s anthology *Foreign Shakespeare*, published in 1993.

I take 1993 as my starting point to investigate what changes about Indian adaptations of Shakespeare over the past 25 years, but also, more importantly to ask what this shift to desi Shakespeare might have to tell us about the des. I argue that these adaptations desify Shakespeare and thereby render visible the performative nature of everyday categories of identity—race, caste, gender, language, religion—that structure our contemporary perception of the nation.

**The Nation and Shakespeare in Contemporary India**

Towards the beginning of *Shakespeare Wallah*, the acting troupe are invited to perform at the palace of an erstwhile maharaja4, one who is desperately holding on to the trappings of former opulence—trips to London and socializing with royalty, vintage cars, and private performances. Seated at a formal and extravagant dining table, along with his silent wife and daughters and the members of the acting troupe, he holds forth on his love and knowledge of Shakespeare, performing to his captive audience—“who could have expressed so well all the turbulences of the heart, who could have written so profoundly on the cares of kingship, ‘uneasy lies the head that wears the crown’.” He then shifts into a nostalgic reverie describing the decline of his position since his father’s time, bemoaning the fact that while they were once worshipped by their people, now half his palace has been turned into offices. In response, Tony and Carla Buckingham, the lead actors of the troupe, begin an extended recitation from Shakespeare’s *Richard II*:

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4 Played by Utpal Dutt, a member of the real-life Shakespeareana troupe and perhaps best known in the Indian Shakespeare context for his adaptations in the performance tradition of jatra, see Rustom Bharucha, “The Revolutionary Theater of Utpal Dutt” in *Rehearsals of Revolution*; Tapati Gupta, “From proscenium to paddy fields: Utpal Dutt's Shakespeare Jatra.”
[...] let us sit upon the ground

And tell sad stories of the death of kings:

How some have been deposed, some slain in war,

Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed”

These two quotations at the dining table, the first from *Henry IV Part II* and the second from *Richard II*, the first by the haunted king struggling with reconciling his past actions with the legitimacy of his claim to the throne and the second by the deposed king looking towards the future, come from texts in Shakespeare’s oeuvre that deal with a shift in worldview, particularly as pertains to the nature, rights, and demands of kingship. While Richard II is associated with “the more abstract principles of divinely sanctioned hereditary right,” and Bolingbroke (later Henry IV) with “a material and practical point of view” (Mauss Norton Introduction 887), the former with a ceremonial past and the latter with the advent of change, the parallels with a nascent nation-state throwing off the shackles of empire while not explicitly stated are not a stretch.

When asked whether they will be able to perform the requested play with limited resources, Tony Buckingham responds: “we too are used to making adjustments,” analogizing their changes in fortune. Once loved, adulated, celebrated by the masses both now desperately hang on to the trappings of their former lives, like Richard II clinging to the performative rituals that marked the previous era. The maharaja responds with a purportedly philosophical witticism, “we are all forced to make cuts in the text written for us by destiny” that then receives the expected praise from his captive audience. Performance becomes a metaphor for the means through which they comprehend and deal with the social changes sweeping through the world and the nation, and Shakespeare becomes both part of the fading past and the means through
which this shift is dramatized. Tellingly, the performance that follows is of *Antony and Cleopatra* a play that, among other things, performs the demise of an empire and its way of life, the impact of cross-cultural contact. When the camera shifts to the audience we see the solitary maharaja, with an attendant fanning him, and four male companions seated at a distance—a dismal image at odds with the throngs of adoring fans that follow the Bollywood diva Manjula later on in the film.

This performance at a maharaja’s palace, replete with the ceremony and ritual accompanying a royal patronage of the arts, is immediately followed by a scene by the roadside. Waylaid by car trouble, Lizzie and other members of the acting troupe watch as a street performer coaxes his monkeys to dance, clap, and enact a mini-farce. He informs his accidental audience that he is facing a decline in livelihood, that “people don’t care for his art anymore.”

Figure 2 The maharaja flanked by his attendants at the private performance of *Antony and Cleopatra*
Bobby, a veteran actor, responds: “our story exactly.” The film compels us to draw parallels between these three—the situation of the Shakespearean actors, the streetside entertainment, and the maharaja’s lost glory—marking, in the process, a moment at the cusp of a dramatic shift for the nation, towards its modern and postcolonial self. The backdrop for this film is one where Shakespeare and the accompanying markers of nobility and traditional performance are relegated to the past which, while not exclusively associated with the British Raj, nonetheless appear to have little place in the newly independent India. Filmed in 1965 and seeking to depict a nascent country still working to define itself—a nation-state inflected by modernity—the movie both relegates Shakespeare to the past of empire and utilizes Shakespeare to dramatize and describe this transition.

Fast forward to 2017, to one of the most recent Indian adaptations of Shakespeare, The Hungry, a low-budget film version of Titus Andronicus. The film opens with crows circling a mound of smoking trash, located on the outskirts of the nation’s capital, the detritus of contemporary urban Indian life stands in stark contrast to the opulence, glitz, and glamour of the lives of India’s super-rich that form the subject matter of the rest of the film. Firmly located in the here and now of a country caught between the competing demands of tradition and modernity, dealing with the repercussions of holding onto the local or expanding to include the global, The Hungry displays a concern with representing and critiquing the nation.

As in Shakespeare Wallah, a similar gathering around a formal dining table comes towards the beginning of the film. However, here, the patriarch and business tycoon Tathagata Ahuja (Titus), newly released from jail, appears not to bemoan the passing of a bygone era but rather to celebrate the hope and birth of a new merger, the marriage of his son Sunny (Saturninus) with his erstwhile business partner’s daughter, the much older Tulsi (Tamara).
Seated before portraits of garlanded ancestors, he quotes not from Shakespeare but a *shehr* from Mohammad Iqbal, one that implies a modesty that is at odds with both his influence and his ambition: “Develop yourself to such heights so that before every decree/ God will ask of you—what is your wish.”

This opening feast celebrating the newly engaged couple and the newly released Tathagata brings together branches of the family from India, the UK and the US, reflecting a world in which Indianness is “about a global category rather than a local citizenship” (Dwyer *Bollywood’s India* 64). It is marked by an almost disturbing level of excess as platters of whole roasted meats and fish appear in a never-ending sequence culminating in an overdetermined symbolic dessert—saffron *kheer* as a “sun” (Sunny) on the plate topped with a basil leaf (*tulsi*). The climactic feast that ends both *Titus Andronicus* and *The Hungry* is desified. Tulsi (Tamara), resplendent in her wedding finery, licks her fingers as she demolishes the platter of *kababs* in front of her. The revelation and carnage that follows becomes the backdrop for a wandering herd of goats who pick their way over corpses to nibble on the remains of the feast. This emphasis on the excessive appetites and dissolute lifestyles of the rich underpins the film, the crows circling a mountain of trash and the goats grazing on a bloody feast are an explicit critique of the consequences of this lifestyle.

Shakespeare shifts, therefore, from the space of citation in *Shakespeare Wallah*, from a lens through which to view the transition from empire to nation, an imperial colonial past to a democratic postcolonial future. In *The Hungry*, Shakespeare is subsumed into the plot of the film and is instead the means by which the nation is represented and critiqued, performing the hybrid *desi* Shakespeare that *Shakespeare Wallah* seems to imply is impossible. Tathagatha Ahuja

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5 *Khudi ko kar buland itna ki taqdir se pehle/ Khuda bande se khud puchhe bata teri raza kya he.*
replaces the maharaja of *Shakespeare Wallah*, while the erstwhile nobility have all but lost their wealth, prestige, and influence, they have been replaced in postcolonial and global India by a class of the uber-rich, a select few business families who dominate the economy, whose extravagant escapades and lavish weddings pepper the news.

While these readings of the two films demonstrate, on the one hand, a pronounced difference in the use of Shakespeare, more importantly they depict a transformation in the understanding of the Indian nation, tracing an arc from the nation at the moment of decolonization to the present where the twinned phenomena of liberalization and globalization have had an unquestionable impact on how India is imagined and performed.

Indian Shakespeare criticism relies heavily on historicizing Shakespeare’s presence in the subcontinent, underscoring the double bind of the postcolonial subject, for whom Shakespeare is “a sign of neo-colonial hegemony” (Panja and Saraf 3). In the introduction to *India’s*

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6 Within the broader field of global Shakespeare performance, Tathagata Ahuja is clearly modelled on Anthony Hopkins portrayal of Titus in Julie Taymor’s *Titus*, a portrayal that is itself inflected by Hopkins’ Hannibal Lector in *The Silence of the Lambs*.
Shakespeare, Poonam Trivedi describes the “two hundred years of interaction between India and Shakespeare” as a relationship “deeply embedded in the contradiction of colonialism—a matrix of simultaneous submission and resistance” (18). She traces this contradiction in the two avenues through which Shakespeare entered the Indian consciousness: the classroom where “the study of Shakespeare was an imperial imposition” and the stage where “a popular Shakespeare [was] transformed and transmuted in translation” (15). These articles and anthologies on Shakespeare in India have, quite rightly, pushed back against the notion of a universal genius, directing our attention to the fact that “the meanings of Shakespeare’s plays were both derived from and used to establish colonial authority” (Loomba and Orkin 1). However, this emphasis on historicizing has led to a colonial–postcolonial binary in Indian Shakespeare criticism that reiterates an original–adaptation hierarchy where, even if an adaptation is valorized as postcolonial critique, the Shakespeare play is treated as the unequivocal point of origin. Equally, this perspective is particularly inapposite for a contemporary context where the colonial heritage is no longer the only, and possibly not even the dominant, conduit through which Indians encounter Shakespeare.

Paromita Chakravarti. *India’s Shakespeare*, as the first foray into this field, covered a broad swathe of interactions between Shakespeare and India—historical, linguistic, performative, and critical. *Performing Shakespeare in India* expanded this field to include a range of cultural artefacts, shifting perspective to reflect an investment in “a socio-historical and socio-cultural engagement with the agenda of identity formation in India” (Panja and Saraf 1). *Bollywood Shakespeares*, in contrast, narrowed its scope to the very particular context of the Hindi language popular film industry, focusing on the intersection of Shakespeare and Bollywood in an increasingly globalized world. More recently, *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas*, foregrounds plurality in its study of Indian Shakespeare film, striving to move beyond both what counts as Indian film and what counts as Shakespeare on film. My research is indebted to these three collections, both in terms of drawing on the archives they describe and responding, in part, to the provocative questions they raise in their introductions about the relationship between Shakespeare, identity, and location.

The most recent book on Indian Shakespeare is Jonathan Gil Harris’ *Masala Shakespeare*, a monograph that is self-confessedly part critical memoir, part Shakespeare criticism, and part love letter to Indian cinema. Harris’ central conceit of *masala*—in the context of food referring to a blend of different ingredients, but associated more broadly with embellishment, exaggeration and desire—is a quality that he argues both Shakespeare and India share. It is this *masala*, this plurality or “more-than-one-ness” that he suggests is slowly being eradicated by a political turn towards purity and singularity. The *desi* (local or Indian) and the *firangi* (the foreigner, and in most cases referring to Shakespeare and/or Harris) figure prominently in the choric interludes that pepper this book. In these interludes, and in his argument for plurality more broadly, Harris is particularly interested in the poetic twinning of
these two figures, often using his readings of Indian Shakespeare adaptations or Indian film more broadly, as a lens through which to reinterpret Shakespeare. This dissertation aligns with much of Harris’ analyses and I take this as evidence that the productions and the field more broadly invite such readings.

However, this dissertation departs from *Masala Shakespeare* in three important ways. First, in the use of the central conceit of *desify*, I am particularly interested in the intersection of the *desi* and the *firangi*, i.e. the moment of becoming *desi*. This focus rests not so much on the startling similarity or twinning between the two, which on occasion has been stretched to accommodate such platitudes as “Shakespeare was actually Indian,” but rather on their very difference. Second, while I share Harris’ concern about the disturbing shift from plurality towards purity, I am less optimistic about the plural, hybrid, and multivocal idea of India that he celebrates as preceding this shift, an idea that is inescapably intertwined with hierarchies of power and networks of oppression. What is more compelling I argue, is the overlap in the period that marks the move towards a more singular vision of India and the period that has seen a sharp spike in Indian Shakespeare adaptations and in academic criticism about Indian Shakespeare adaptations. This overlap suggests a utilization of, and association with, Shakespearean sources that complicate Harris’ view of them as innately *masala*. Third, this dissertation differs dramatically from Harris’ expansive work—he engages not just with Indian Shakespeare but with the larger corpuses of Shakespearean texts and Indian cinema—in its narrow focus on contemporary, self-consciously Indian, Shakespeare adaptations.

While, I argue, Indian Shakespeare criticism has relied heavily on a historicized colonial–postcolonial binary, a similar emphasis on the N-dash between colonial and postcolonial provides the dominant framework for conceiving of the Indian nation and Indian nationalism.
Impossible to define in terms of a shared language, religion, history or geography, the “Indian nation” has too frequently been read exclusively in terms of its inception as a political entity—both drawing on and as a response to colonialism. Others have highlighted the discursive nature of the “idea of India” imposed on an otherwise disparate and diverse polity through an “apparatus deploying various modes of dissemination—through the fictional and literary imagination and the writing of history, enabled by print, communication, and an educational system” (Virdi 28). An extreme version of this perspective suggests an emphatic gap between this “idea of India” and the lived experiences of Indians. Equally, the emphasis on decolonization as our primary means of describing the Indian nation and nationalism does not give us the room to consider India in the world, today, and the des and desi as historically situated, fluid, contingent, and relative categories. Within the specific history of the postcolonial Indian state, Partition, as the originary trauma is figured as the event that simultaneously birthed and divided the nation, a perspective that rests both on the assumption of unity or wholeness prior to this imposed rupture and on a belief in the power of arbitrary borders to impart an innate sense of belonging. These potent myths of nascent nationhood paper over what was a prolonged, messy, and contested process. I include in this dissertation the margins, the borderlands, and the contested territories associated with the contemporary Indian state, locations and moments that reveal the constructedness of the borders and origins of nationhood.

The dominant metaphor for conceiving of the construction of the Indian nation has been “imagination.” Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s seminal book *Imagined Communities*, studies of the inception and continuing role of Hindi cinema rely heavily on this formulation, substituting Anderson’s description of the role of print-languages with that of Hindi cinema in
creating “the embryo of the nationally imagined community” (44). These texts see Hindi cinema, posited as the only pan-Indian cinema, as “modern mythology, a unique repository of India’s public imaginings, shaped by fantasy, nostalgia, and desire” (Dwyer Bollywood’s India 30), as a “narration of the nation [including] images of the nation-state through a visual shorthand of landscape, maps, particularities of dress, and utterance used to evoke feelings of identification” (Chakravarty 14) and whose “agenda [is] imagining a unified nation” (Virdi 1). In its historical inception and corpus of material, Hindi cinema lends itself to these arguments and the extent of its reach provides evidence for the feedback loop where “Hindi cinema in turn shapes the way that people see modern India and interpret it” (Dwyer Bollywood’s India 9).

The focus on imagination and narration, however, results in a concept of the des that is abstract and at a remove from the everyday and the commonplace. This approach draws on a vocabulary associated with consolidated written bodies of knowledge, purportedly stable texts. In proposing a shift from narration and imagination to performance, I rely on Diana Taylor’s theorization of the archive and the repertoire, the former comprising “supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)” while the latter “ephemeral […] embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)” (19). She proposes scenarios (as opposed to texts or narratives) as “meaning-making paradigms,” a shift that requires us to deal with the “embodiment of the social actors” (28-9). The productions I consider in this dissertation do not constitute an alternative archive for Shakespeare in India, rather the shift that I am proposing is in the approach to these materials.

By taking as my objects of analysis self-consciously Indian adaptations of Shakespeare in theatre and film, my focus is on performance (not narration or imagination) as the mode through which des and desi are perceived and interrogated—across language and media. In making this
argument, I am not suggesting that all performances of Shakespeare in India are inherently concerned with the nation or what it means to be Indian, but what I am suggesting is that productions that self-consciously emphasize their desi character provide us with a unique corpus of material for picking apart what constitutes the desi or desi in performance. In doing so, I am firmly locating the desi in the quotidian, in embodied performance and in speech and not in an abstract “idea of India” imposed from above. I do not, equally, want to make the argument that there is a single and homogenous definition of the desi; my purpose, instead, is to pick apart the concept and to analyze how the crosshatched categories of identity—gender, religion, language, caste and region—interrogate and absorb an overarching idea of the desi.

Performance: the Stage and the Screen

The core struggle in Shakespeare Wallah between tradition and modernity, theatre and film, colonial and postcolonial, is worked out in the figure of Sanju whose two love interests, Manjula, a film actress, and Lizzie, a member of the theatre troupe, stand in for the binary that the film ostensibly sets up. Sanju, unlike the maharaja, appears to have more easily navigated the shift to modernity, but is nonetheless a figure whose everyday life appears defined by indolence. He plays pool, goes hunting, lounges around in bed and listens to cricket commentary, and, while he has what, to his mind at least, are ambitious plans to one day produce a film of his own, his life lacks the drive, direction and discipline that we see in Manjula and Lizzie. Searching for this missing spark, Sanju takes on an almost choric role for the modern and discontented postcolonial

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8 I am consciously avoiding such a broad generalization as was the case in Frederic Jameson’s controversial article “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” For extended discussions of this essay, see Aijaz Ahmed’s “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’”; Ian Buchanan’s “National Allegory Today: A Return to Jameson;” Neil Lazarus’ The Postcolonial Unconscious; and Imre Szeman’s “Who’s Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization.”
Indian as he analyzes these two very different forms of performance, judging Lizzie’s to be “real” and “true” while Manjula’s is merely popular and empty.

Despite disparagingly referring to Manjula as a “songster” and unfit “to speak [Lizzie’s] name” Sanju keeps returning to her. Similarly, despite being drawn to the novelty that Lizzie offers, Sanju reacts violently to the notion that her life and livelihood depend on being in public view, something that is detrimental to his izzat (honor). This oscillation reaches its head at a theatrical performance of Othello which Manjula deigns to attend just as the last scene begins. Tony Buckingham is performing Othello in blackface while his daughter Lizzie plays Desdemona, mirroring their real-life relationship—Geoffrey Kendall and his daughter Felicity were both actors in Shakespeareana. Manjula’s entrance causes a disturbance as audience members crane their necks to catch a glimpse of her, the increasing disruptive murmuring causing Buckingham to stop the performance to scold the audience. The performance eventually gets underway again though Manjula “leaves the auditorium out of boredom and disgust as Desdemona is murdered onstage” (Bhatia, “Different Othellos” 165).

This scene dramatizes the growing disinterest of Indian audiences in this form of Shakespeare performance, marking the shift from theatre to film, from traditional to modern. It begins with a frontal view of the stage at a distance, the canopied bed occupying the center and dominating our gaze. It is clear we are watching a theatrical performance. However, as Manjula enters Sanju’s box, the camera, along with the audience, turns to focus on them. Following this disruption, we are repeatedly reminded that we are watching a film: the camera occupies a position on stage, shifting between different angles and zooming in to allow a degree of detailed facial expression impossible to see in theatre. Even when the camera returns to a frontal view of the stage, it is from a position further back that includes in the forefront Sanju and Manjula.
watching the production. Thus, the disjunction between our experience of watching a film and of the audience, particularly Manjula whose reactions (or lack thereof) dominate screen time, watching live theatre is underscored, and the scene in its camerawork performs the shift from live to filmed performance. In the scene immediately following this where Sanju apologizes to Tony Buckingham for the disruption, the actor describes it as “a victory for the motion pictures over the theatre” which, though referring to Manjula’s popularity overpowering their ability to keep an audience engaged, could easily be applied to the role of the camera in that very scene. Even as Othello kills Desdemona onstage, the low camera angle ensures that we possess Lizzie’s point of view—as viewers of the film we do not see the physical interaction between Othello and Desdemona that viewers of the theatrical performance do.

Figure 4 Manjula and Sanju watching the performance of Othello

If we read the inset performance as speaking to the other interracial relationship in the film, that between Sanju and Lizzie, the complete absence of physical interaction and the
particular focus on the murder scene might foreshadow the doomed end of their relationship. However, what is hidden from view on stage is shown to us in film in Sanju and Lizzie’s physical relationship, the artifice of film provides a permissibility that the liveness and authenticity of the stage do not. Equally, however, what is hidden from view on stage is done only through the technology of the medium of film. This scene thus provides an argument in favor of the inclusion of both theatre and film in this dissertation, revealing not just the different technologies, resources and impact of the different media, but also their diverse areas of overlap. Shakespeare in Indian film comprises a rich and largely accessible archive, while Shakespeare in Indian theatre is less well documented, but it is precisely this juxtaposition of what the two media offer and obstruct that contribute to the dissertation’s exploration of the desification of Shakespeare in performance.

Considering the two scenes that share screen space—the Shakespeare onstage and Manjula offstage—works not just to juxtapose theatre and film, but also imagination and performance. Sanju describes her disruption as “making a display of herself,” accusing her of scripting the entire episode by inviting a press photographer into the audience and deflecting attention away from the stage. She, in turn, lashes out by describing the stage performance as “moaning, groaning, bloodthirsty, badly acted” and as devoid of the glamour that accompanies film, taking place in a “dirty,” “shabby” and “cheap” environment, berating Lizzie for having “no shame” by appearing in “her nightdress onstage.” For every moment that Manjula is a part of the audience, she is also on public display and also performs a particular role. Sweeping in with a sense of entitlement, dressed in a traditional sari and dripping with jewels, offering Sanju paan from her own hands, watching the final murder through her fingers—all these actions assemble to construct the public persona of the feminine, traditional, beautiful ideal of the Indian film
actress who lives life in public view but is not public property. “I am Manjula,” she proclaims, “Where I go, hundreds, thousands follow me.” The proximity of self-proclaimed performance, i.e. Othello on stage, throws into relief performance in alternate sphere, i.e. Manjula’s clever and considered construction of a public identity. Placing Manjula and Lizzie-as-Desdemona in the same cinematic frame allows us to see the desi woman not simply as an imagined ideal but as a performed identity.

This project utilizes an analogous methodology in its approach to the productions under discussion, throwing into relief the desi as performance. By arguing that the crosshatched categories of contemporary Indian identity—religion, gender, caste, region, and language—are performative, I suggest that these productions do not simply reflect contemporary Indian society but rather function as sites to work out the contested associations and definitions that accrue around these different categories.

Global Shakespeare and the centrality of location

In his introduction to the now canonical anthology, Foreign Shakespeare, Dennis Kennedy exhorts critics to move beyond “look[ing] upon Shakespeare’s popularity in other countries as an example of his comprehensive appeal” (2) suggesting that while there is an inevitable loss in translation, “some foreign performances may have a more direct access to the power of the plays” (5). His concluding claim, dismantling what he calls “the myth of cultural ownership” to argue that “Shakespeare doesn’t belong to any nation or anybody: Shakespeare is foreign to all of us” (16) is one that while written in a book dealing largely with Shakespeare’s presence in continental Europe has been adopted as a precept beyond those geographical confines. In his afterword, Kennedy suggests that this shift towards explicating “a theory that can explain how ‘Shakespeare’ operates in Mnouchkine’s orientalism, Ninagawa’s occidentalism,
and in what Pavis calls ‘the politically radical thought of the Third World’…is the most important task Shakespeareans face. It is much more important than linguistic analysis, textual examination, psychological assessments, historical research or any of the Anglo-centered occupations scholars have traditionally valued and perpetuated” (300). Following the 1993 publication of this edited collection, global Shakespeare, both as an emerging field of academic criticism and as a subset of Shakespeare performance has seen an exponential rise.

Despite the evident popularity of this term in college syllabi, conference panels, international festivals and key words of academic journals, it remains one that is contested by members of the field, both in terms of what it means and more generally whether the term “global” should be used at all. It is criticized on the one hand for functioning as a “testimony to the Bard’s universality” (Lei 3) and as a corresponding “tautology: Shakespeare is believed to be universal, which is why the canon has gone global; on the other hand, global Shakespeare is seen as evidence of Shakespeare’s universality” (Joubin Handbook 427). On the other hand, reconsiderations of the term “global” suggest that it “is in fact the product of specific, historically and culturally determined localities” (Massai 9) and that global Shakespeare is “challenged by the competing pull of tendencies to privilege local histories over grand narratives and to counteract provincialism with a broader, if global, perspective” (Joubin “Methodology” 285). The global is thus in a productive tension with the local: both synonymous and oppositional.

The term “global Shakespeare” is, however, not without its complications, most prominently in the associations with globalization, cultural homogenization and neo-imperialism where Shakespeare as a transnational brand and icon, as a symbol of cultural capital, “serves corporate goals, entrenched power structures, and conservative cultural ideologies” (Desmet and Sawyer 3). It appears, however, that this is the term that has persisted, carrying more currency
than the various alternatives that have been suggested over the past few decades: local, regional, foreign, worldwide, international, intercultural, and native to name a few.

What, therefore, do we mean by Global Shakespeare? It appears, based on consensus, that there are two primary characteristics that make a performance part of the field of Global Shakespeare. The first, that it is a Shakespeare that has some connection with locales outside of the established Anglo-American metropolitan mainstream. This might mean that the production incorporates performance traditions from other parts of the world, was performed in locations other than the metropolitan centers of Anglo-American theatre or was performed in translation. In short, this is what we might otherwise term “Foreign Shakespeare”; “Shakespeare without his language” or intercultural Shakespeare (Kennedy 1). The second characteristic, on the other hand, is the production’s capacity to travel. In other words, Global Shakespeare is Shakespeare that uses the circuits of globalization to travel. This includes international festival circuits, the Internet, and film broadcasting. Productions that belong in this category include both what Beatrice Bi-qi Lei refers to as “centrifugal departures from England to various [global] locations and centripetal returns” (14). The two primary characteristics that define our perception of Global Shakespeare seem at first glance to be in opposition—the first referring to productions that are rooted in particularity and are, correspondingly, intensely local and the second referring to productions that seem unmoored from a specific place, able to traverse distances and differences of cultural, linguistic, and performative varieties. What we might consider the core of the field of Global Shakespeare are productions that possess both these characteristics, ones that are shaped by the particularities of their place of inception while also possessing the ability to be received in other parts of the world. Very often, these are productions from the periphery that have somehow gained the economic and cultural traction to be visible in the West.
Unsurprisingly, this produces a skewed perception of the field as a whole, one whose parameters are determined by visibility. However, what runs through these varying definitions of what constitutes Global Shakespeare is an emphasis on location—both fixed and mutable. Geography plays a far more prominent role in our understanding of Global Shakespeare than temporality; Shakespeare is local, regional, national, global, worldwide, and international.

However, this emphasis on location has been simultaneously accompanied by a disavowal of the nation as a productive category for approaching Global Shakespeare. As Mark Thornton Burnett puts it in his introduction to *Filming Shakespeare in the Global Marketplace*:

> the nation is no longer the first point of contact; rather, supranational fields of collectivity are becoming the norm, activities that take place without borders are rising and social spaces that take little account of historical perimeters comprise the new geographies.

Globalization has indeed generated a smaller world, but one more enlarged in scope, complexity and power than ever before envisaged (2).

Alexa Joubin similarly argues that the “traffic of Global Shakespeare constitutes a postnational space” (“Methodology” 281) and that the tendency towards “national profiling” in criticism “overtake[s] more nuanced appreciation of individual artistic talents and concerns” (*Handbook* 431).

The tendency, therefore, in Global Shakespeare has been to focus on the intensely local and the broadly transnational. I argue that category of the nation remains vital and indispensable not merely as an alternative to these but rather as entwined and inseparable. By bringing *des* and *desi* to the forefront of my argument I seek to upend two determining axes of the field of Global Shakespeare that prioritize a geographical and linguistic point of origin: the center-periphery and the global-local. In this respect I am responding in part to Beatrice Lei’s evaluation of Asian
Shakespeare criticism where “a predominantly Western perspective…attends to what Asia has
done to Shakespeare—be it reducing or enhancing, embellishing or blemishing—while largely
ignoring what Shakespeare has done to Asia” (3). By circumscribing a contained, but not
impervious, field of Indian Shakespeare I consider not just alternate avenues for Shakespeare’s
presence in India, but also how these productions interact with and influence each other,
operating within what Douglas Lanier and Alexa Joubin refer to as a rhizomatic framework. By
considering the tension between the intensely local, the triumphantly national, and the
universally global, I argue that these productions do not evacuate these terms of their
significance but move beyond considering them exclusively as descriptors and instead as
categories that are negotiated in the realm of performance. Unlike prior studies of Shakespeare in
India that have relied heavily on the consequences of Shakespearean adaptations’ colonial
origins, this project shifts in its methodology to emphasize a synoptic view of Shakespeare in
India, its multiple vectors of influence—colonial, global, postcolonial, and transnational—and its
diverse areas of overlap.

Chapter Summaries

Each chapter revolves around a specific Shakespeare play and its desified iterations—
*Romeo and Juliet, Othello, Hamlet,* and *Twelfth Night*—concentrating, in the process, on
different components of Indianness or desiness. In choosing which plays to include, I relied
largely on what the archive revealed, both in terms of the relative popularity of these plays and in
terms of their overt and explicit *desification*. While these four chapters could easily have been
organized around four Shakespearean tragedies, the most popular genre for adaptation, by
including a chapter on *Twelfth Night*, an outlier in three respects—as a comedy, as a single
production, and as performed beyond the geographical boundaries of the nation—the project
tests the limits of the concept of desification. Running through these four chapters is a theorization of language in performance, shifting between the concepts of neighboring, regional, vernacular, dialect, national, and global. Thus, together these chapters emphasize the role of embodied performance in determining and upending a national identity.

The first chapter, “Mirrors and Neighbors: Arshinagar and filmic adaptations of Romeo and Juliet” focuses on Aparna Sen’s 2015 film Arshinagar (Town of Mirrors) which, I suggest, conceives of the relationship between the star-crossed lovers as neighborly, introducing in the process the conceptual category of the neighbor as one’s reflection in the mirror: almost the same, but not quite; familiar, yet inherently estranged. I argue that the fundamentally ambiguous figure of the neighbor provides a lens to read the film’s hybrid multilingual soundscape, its gendered and religious cross dressing and its manipulation of the proximate performance techniques of cinema and theatre. Most importantly, I argue, Arshinagar delivers a political message in its use of the heterogenous neighborhood rather than the homogenous family as its allegory for the nation by moving from the implied ultimate reconciliation inherent in the category of the family to the profound ambivalence at the core of neighborly relations.

In my second chapter, “‘I feel a growing gap between my soul and body:’ Othello on the Margins on the Indian Stage and Screen” I trace a genealogy of Othello in India, focusing primarily on five moments in the performance history of the play that cut across language, region, time period, intended audiences, and medium. I mark the lines of familial resemblance and trace the development of the figure of the outsider from the context of an imperial imagination to a postcolonial and national one, ending with the 2016 theatrical production of Athhoi, in which Othello is a Dalit or lower-caste man in contemporary India. In this chapter I shift to the internal hierarchies of the purportedly homogenous Hindu nation, focusing
specifically on the performative and socially constructed nature of caste in contemporary India. While I draw heavily on critical race and critical caste scholarship in the arena of international human rights and law, I argue for performance as an alternative site for demonstrating the affordances of the adoption and application of critical race theory to the context of caste in India.

In my third chapter, “‘A little patch of ground:’ Hamlet and the borderlands,” I explore various iterations of Hamlet that are imbued with a vernacular sensibility, i.e. set or performed in a specific regional environment that is arguably marginal in relation to a stereotypical perception of India. This chapter culminates in my reading of the 2014 film Haider in which the tragedy of the contested territory of Kashmir is conflated with the tragedy of the individual protagonist, Haider, marking the Indian nation as both distanced and culpable. I argue that these productions manipulate the trope of the body politic that is central to Shakespeare’s Hamlet by replacing the individual with the regional collective, pushing back in the process against a homogenous nation.

My last chapter, “‘Shakespeare Kamaal Hain!:’ Piya Behrupiya, Diaspora, and the Idea of Shakespeare” deals with Piya Behrupiya (Beloved Impersonator), an adaptation of Twelfth Night originally commissioned for the London 2012 Globe to Globe festival. In this chapter, I expand outwards from the nation to a more global perspective, considering an Indian Shakespeare adaptation both on an international stage and alongside other iterations of Shakespeare from different countries. In exploring what happens to Indian Shakespeare when it travels, I bring the context and concerns of diaspora to bear on this production. While Piya Behrupiya was conceived of for a festival that celebrated the universality and diversity of Shakespeare, I argue that this production troubled both those signifiers by questioning, through its performance, both the “idea of Shakespeare” as a model for highbrow education, performance, and art, and the “idea of India” as a uniform and homogenous nation.
Chapter 1: Mirrors and Neighbors: *Arshinagar* and Filmic Adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*\(^9\)

Hailed as the first adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in Bengali film, Aparna Sen’s *Arshinagar* (2015) literally translates to “Town of Mirrors,” a motif that is present in the film in its aesthetics and music, but perhaps most powerfully in the political message it seeks to convey. Mirror images, reflections that blend distortion with recognition, pepper the film, itself a blurry refracted version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Set in contemporary India, the eponymous town and the film draw their title from a Bengali Baul\(^{10}\) song, “Bariʼr Kacche Arshi Nagar” (“The Town of Mirrors Near My Home”) said to have been composed by Lalon Fakir, a nineteenth-century Bengali Baul saint known for his religious tolerance and pluralism. Though the song, in itself, speaks of the deep spiritual relationship between Lalon and his guru, Siraj, *Arshinagar* deploys the song’s central image of the neighbor—an invisible, familiar, yet unknown presence that has the ability to change one’s life—in its depiction of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* to suggest the primacy of the neighborly bond. The film cuts from the young lovers’ first encounter to a Baul performance of this song:

I feel, I feel I can hold him\(^{11}\)
but he eludes my embrace
O he lives so near my place
There’s a Mirrorland beside my home

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\(^9\) A version of this chapter, entitled “Theorizing the Neighbor: *Arshinagar* and *Romeo and Juliet*” was published in *Borrowers and Lenders: A Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* in 2019.

\(^{10}\) The Baul occupies a fundamentally ambiguous role within the Bengali imaginary. The word itself is usually glossed as “mad” and members of this syncretic religious sect, which draws on both Hinduism and Islam, reject orthodox religious practices. They are best known in popular culture for the orally transmitted popular Baul songs that celebrate spiritual freedom.

\(^{11}\) Dhori dhori mone kori/ Dhora dey na more ekjon/ Parshi boshot kore/ Ache barir kache Arshinagar/ Parshi boshot kore/ Ami ekdin naa... Dekhlam tare/ Sei parshi jodi amay chhuto/ Tobe jomjatona dure jeto ekebare.
A neighbor lives near me...
...whom never with my eyes I see
If this neighbor should ever touch me
My hellish woes would forever flee.12

Figure 5 Parvathy Baul performing “Bari’r Kachhe Arshi Nagar” in an empty fairground

In the song, arshinagar (the Mirrorland) and its inhabitant, parshi (the neighbor), both inaccessible to the singer, are suggestive of salvation—to touch the neighbor would mean liberation from pain. But this neighbor, resident in a Mirrorland, is an invisible reflection, at once suggesting that spiritual salvation is within oneself and asserting the impossibility of physical contact between the singer and the neighbor. While the song, which has a history and legacy independent of the film, has been severally interpreted as referring to everyman, a divine power,

12 All transcriptions from the film are my own. Unless otherwise noted, I make use of the translations provided in the film’s English subtitles. However, where necessary, I provide my own translation. This is because the film’s subtitles seek to retain the effect of the rhymes present in the original and in doing so occasionally sacrifice conveying a more literal translation.
a soulmate, and the Great Neighbor, its use to mark the first meeting of the lovers underscores not just their location in the fictional Arshinagar—a Mirrorland so familiar to its viewers, that it may just be next door—but, significantly, the primary relationship between the Hindu Ronojoy Mitra (Rono) and the Muslim Zuleikha Khan (Julie).

Moments before the song, Julie, having realized to her shock that Rono is a Mitra, and therefore both a Hindu and the son of her father’s business rival, refers to him as her parshi (neighbor), the only acceptably neutral term for their association. It is a word that Rono does not quite understand, and seeking translation and clarification, he asks Julie: “Parshi mane neigh-baar?” (“Parshi means neighbor?”). This establishes a name for their relationship, a name that is echoed in the Baul song, suggesting parallels and overlaps between neighborly love, divine love, and romantic love. Shakespeare’s “two households both alike in dignity” (Prologue 1) are, in this “Town of Mirrors,” neighbors, reflections of each other, and intimately bound by this relationship. It is this intimate, yet tenuous, relationship between kinship and hostility, loyalty and distrust, that engenders both the inevitable violence and ultimate reconciliation at the end of the film.

While the figure of the neighbor is thus central to the film’s political message and its interpretation of Romeo and Juliet, I argue that the core characteristics of proximity and difference that define the conceptual categories of the neighbor and, by extension, the neighborhood, play out in the film at multiple levels. Formally, Arshinagar modifies dominant filmic trends in Indian popular cinema by skirting the boundary between the proximate performance techniques of cinema and theatre. This unexpected and, often uncomfortable, insertion of the theatre into cinema—largely through the use of painted backdrops and the

\[13\] My translation.
framing device of a puppet show—deliberately undermines the audience’s expectations of a visually realistic film.

In this musical adaptation, the dialogue comprises largely of rhymed verse in a combination of three languages: Bengali, Hindi/Urdu, and English. Thus, *Arshinagar’s* experimental, multilingual rhymed verse simultaneously establishes and dissolves the boundaries between neighboring languages, depicting both the interlingual *and* intralingual diversity that forms contemporary India’s soundscape. Thematically, *Arshinagar* provides one instance of an alternative means of approaching the concerns of the nation via the neighborhood, rather than the cinematic family. In it, contemporary India can see itself: a society that is marked by underlying religious tension, differences that are manipulated for political gain and can, with only the slightest of warnings, explode into large scale violence and destruction. In *Arshinagar*, thus, the neighbor as that liminal figure who embodies both similarity and difference and the

![Figure 6 The painted backdrop of a Lucknow skyline](image)
neighborly—the ethical imperative and innate hostility that undergirds the relationship between neighbors—loom large as conceptual frameworks. More broadly, however, I suggest that these terms do not just provide a lens to read the film but also work as a productive concept for conceiving of adaptation, permitting us to highlight the comparative while resisting a return to the hierarchical.

In his essay, “Colonizing Love: Romeo and Juliet in Modern Indian Disseminations,” Harish Trivedi compares Romeo and Juliet with the Sanskrit play Abhijnanashakuntalam to argue that the former represents “squarely and forthrightly a Western kind of love” that is very different from the sort portrayed in the older, and therefore more authentically Indian, Kalidasa play (83). This Western love is “more impetuous, more physical, more explicit, more transgressive, and almost more sinful” (83). While the differences that Trivedi catalogues between the two texts are certainly accurate, his claim runs the risk first of assuming that each text is representative of a civilization’s attitude to love and second, despite his acknowledgment of the harmonious existence of different types of love in India, that somehow this “Western love” remains impossibly alien and fundamentally unassimilable. He asks, “[d]id the English language and Western civilization penetrate so deeply into our culture as to colonize our very notion of love?” (75). His argument that Romeo and Juliet has changed the way Indians conceive of and represent love might be true at the microscopic level, but it simultaneously fails to acknowledge the ways in which Romeo and Juliet has been changed, adapted and mapped onto older notions of love in India. In other words, the penetrating influence that Trivedi talks of is not unidirectional. This notion of a unidirectional transmission from source to target culture, from original to adaptation, is a defining feature of adaptation studies and one that I will be complicating in this project.
Adaptation theory is relatively new academic field that draws heavily on translation theory and its focus has largely been limited to what functions as the most visible and marked type of adaptation: from novels to films. While both tendencies have provided productive avenues for the theorization of adaptation, the use of linguistic metaphors and the prevalence of the novel to film model have resulted in a limited notion of what constitutes adaptation, both as process and product. This mode of analysis draws on the status of an adaptation as derivative and secondary, situating the relationship between the two as unidirectional, hierarchical, and genealogical. Correspondingly, Shakespeare adaptations are broadly perceived either as an homage to the original, constitutive of the Benjaminian afterlife of the text, or as a corrective gesture bordering on cannibalism that draws on the Shakespeare but supplements or edits it. What remains understudied is the adaptation’s paradoxical potential both to extend and end the afterlife of Shakespeare. The adaptation is fundamentally both similar and different, both comforting and threatening—qualities that are central to the theorization of the neighbor and predicated on one’s orientation with respect to the object of study. Thus, instead of drawing on the adaptation’s temporally secondary status to suggest a linear and hierarchical relationship between the “original” and the “adaptation” that is predicated on fidelity, conceiving of the relationship between the two as neighborly allows for a more pliable and multidirectional definition.

This conceptual figure—the neighbor—adds a third category to the friend/enemy dyad that structures ideologies of nationalism and has been the subject of recent sustained attention in the field of political theology because of the centrality of the injunction to neighborly love in
Judeo-Christian doctrine.\(^{14}\) Despite the pitfalls of applying these theoretical explorations to a context that does not derive explicitly and exclusively from the same theological foundations, it seems to me that the figure of the neighbor as one’s reflection in the mirror—almost the same but not quite; familiar, yet inherently estranged—is one that is crucial to our reception both of *Arshinagar*’s political message and of its ontological status as an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, particularly because of the connotations of existing in a common space. The neighbor traverses the divide between “familiarity and anonymity” and is that image of the self that can never be fully known, one who is both “intimate and strange, both proximate and remote, both reassuring and threatening” (Edmondson 10).\(^{15}\)

It is this figure of the neighbor, as an amalgam of fear and familiarity, that marks both the beginning and end of Rono and Julie’s relationship. The film’s uses of Baul music, a mystic tradition that is known for transcending the division between Hindus and Muslims, bookend this relationship. The Baul songs appear when the possibility of Hindu-Muslim union blooms—the moment when the neighborly relationship slides towards the more intimate—and when that very possibility is torn apart—the moment when the neighborly relationship shifts into the antagonistic. The Mitra (Montague) and Khan (Capulet) families are in the construction business. Though they dabble in smuggling drugs, wielding political influence and shadowy overseas deals, the central conflict is a competition over a bid that will demolish the Arshinagar slum to make way for a shopping mall. Fed up of trying to negotiate compensation for the slum dwellers,

\(^{14}\) See *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* by Kenneth Reinhard, Eric L. Santner, and Slavoj Žižek for an extended discussion on the figure of the neighbor in the fields of critical theory and psychoanalysis.

\(^{15}\) In his book, *The Neighboring Text*, George Edmondson analyzes three different texts dealing with the story of *Troilus and Criseyde* to forward this notion of a horizontal (as opposed to genealogical) relationship between texts within the context of psychoanalytic and medieval understandings of the figure of the neighbor.
the powers that be set fire to the temple at the center of the slum to stoke communal hatred, thereby allowing for the slum to burn down at no cost to them and paving the way for the construction of the mall. As the violence intensifies, buildings burn, people are slaughtered on screen, and Baul music makes another appearance with the song “Aami Aami Kore Barai” (“All You Say is ‘I’ and ‘Me’!”) which speaks specifically to the ignorance bound up in a self-centered worldview. Aparna Sen, the film’s director, has spoken of her primary motivation behind this film being a desire to depict the culture of intolerance and fear of the Other that has pervaded India, particularly following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the ensuing all-India Hindu-Muslim riots. The film appears to swing between an image of the neighbor as positive and life-changing, on the one hand, and terrifying and destructive on the other. The first Baul song emphasizes values of empathy, unity and universality while the second demands deep self-introspection, seeking to move beyond the labels that constitute our identity, none of which can fully encapsulate a human soul. In the prominent use of Baul music, which calls for a move beyond the material, and the depiction of the ease with which misrecognition results in fatality, Sen seems, instead, to be arguing for a deeper understanding of a shared and universal humanity in which the boundaries between neighbors are dissolved.

This vision of a shared and universal humanity is particularly pronounced in two mirrored moments of cross dressing, where the markers of religious and gendered identity are revealed to be external and fluid. These markers are easily shifted and exchanged, implying that the purportedly essential elements of one’s social identity are necessarily superficial and ephemeral. Within Arshinagar’s color-coded visual aesthetic, the two protagonists largely appear in soft pastel shades, underscoring both their relative innocence and purity, while also disassociating them from their families who always appear in shades of red and black. The two
encounters that bracket their love story, however, feature a different and deliberate costuming choice. At both their first meeting during an evening’s entertainment at the Khan household, and their last, at a level crossing as they attempt to escape the riots and elope, they each bear the markers not just of the other’s gender, but also the other’s faith—a sort of doubled cross-dressing.

Their first meeting takes place at the Khan residence, where preparations are underway for an evening’s entertainment. Against her father’s specified wishes, Julie is set to play a man in the evening’s production, complete with a turban and moustache. Having heard about the play being put on by the girls of the Khan household, Rono has managed along with his friends to enter the house disguised as women in burqas. The black garment, immediately associated with Islam and often perceived as oppressive and restrictive towards women, paradoxically allows the men the freedom to cross over into the private quarters of the Khan house undeterred. In an effort to avoid meeting Parvez, a man she has already decided is too old for her, Julie grabs the arm of the nearest burqa-clad woman, believing her to be her aunt, dragging her into the bathroom. It is only in the bathroom, when her eyes land on the rather masculine looking watch peeking out from under the burqa sleeve of her companion, that she realizes he is a man and a complete stranger. Revealing his identity, Rono begs her not to give him away and she eventually agrees.

The film then cuts from their encounter in the bathroom—the slow removal of the veil, the moustache and the turban—to the Baul song, “Bari’r Kacche Arshi Nagar” (“The Town of Mirrors Near My Home”). When they first meet, therefore, and at the instant that they fall in love, Julie is dressed as a young Hindu boy and Rono has appropriated the attire of an older, conservative Muslim woman.
Their last encounter is similarly depicted. The riots that break out in Arshinagar impede their plans to elope. With the aid of Julie’s singing teacher (the analogue to the Friar) and Fati (Julie’s nurse), plans are made for them to meet at a railway crossing. In order to get past the barricade on the street, Julie and Fati don the disguise of a young Hindu boy and his ailing mother. The markers of religious identity are overt: her *bindi* and bangles, his turban, the autorickshaw driver’s holy thread. Waiting at the level crossing is Rono, once again in the disguise of a burqa-clad woman, a disguise that serves to both mask his religious identity and to hide his face. They see each other just as a train rushes past, obscuring their vision. In those few seconds, Julie is killed by a group of Muslim rioters passing on a truck. As Rono sits weeping over Julie’s body, he too is slaughtered by rioters of his own faith. Thus, at both their first
encounter and their last, they are at once both the same as, and the exact opposite of, each other—the very paradox that underpins the ontology of the neighbor.

Figure 8 Julie dies in Rono’s arms.

Star Crossed Lovers in Indian Popular Cinema: Is there a desi Romeo and Juliet?

The figure of the neighbor and the space of the neighborhood are conspicuous as distinctive markers of Arshinagar’s approach to Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. However, to rely exclusively on this analysis would be to replicate a dominant mode of adaptation criticism where Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet and Arshinagar are placed alongside each other and the changes or shifts from the former—presumed to be a stable text—are tabulated as if they occurred in a vacuum. I argue, instead, that the film’s theorization of the neighbor/hood provides a productive springboard for the reconceptualization of the status of an adaptation. Arshinagar is not the first Indian film to depict inter-religious love, communal violence, or riots. Nor it is the
first Indian film to demonstrate a pertinent, if unattested likeness to *Romeo and Juliet*.\(^{16}\)

However, in its combination of the two and because it self-consciously inserts itself into a national and global tradition of adapting *Romeo and Juliet* for film, it renders visible the modes, methods, and motivations of that process. Thus, considering *Arshinagar* as part of a neighborhood of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations allows for the acknowledgement of a constellation of sources that may be conceived as influential, combative, oppositional, and so on, rather than the limited and singular original–copy relationship.

To suggest that there is a tradition of adapting *Romeo and Juliet* in Indian cinema requires an exploration both of what constitutes a “tradition” and what exactly is meant by “Indian cinema.” Bollywood, the term most often used to describe Indian cinema, particularly outside the sub-continent, points more specifically to Hindi popular cinema produced in Mumbai (formerly Bombay). While the use of this term as a synonym for Indian cinema tends to flatten the linguistic, regional and generic diversity of the field, it also points to the incredible dominance of Hindi popular cinema across the country. Hindi popular cinema, the most prolific film industry in the country, liberally borrows from and cannibalizes commercially successful films in regional and international (read: Hollywood) cinema; equally, it has the widest reach in terms of audience, both national and diasporic.\(^{17}\)

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\(^{16}\) For a discussion on pertinent versus attested likenesses in Shakespeare adaptations see “Pertinent Likeness: Kurosawa’s *The Bad Sleep Well* as a version of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*” by Ann Thompson and John O. Thompson.

\(^{17}\) I consciously chose to utilize the phrase “Hindi popular cinema” though I have at times treated it as synonymous with Indian popular cinema. By this I am referring to a certain mode of popular or commercial cinema that has frequently been associated with the term “Bollywood.” In other words, “‘Bollywood’ has become a shorthand reference . . . to a specific style of filmmaking within the industry which is aggressively oriented toward box-office success and broad audience appeal” (Ganti 3). I do not use the moniker “Bollywood” for a couple of reasons. First, because it is largely and almost exclusively a term associated with the Bombay film industry though it has often, particularly outside the country, been taken to stand for the Indian film industry as a whole and second, because the implication in the name is that the industry is a derivative or copy of Hollywood, which serves to flatten the differences between the
In general, the pairing of Hindi popular cinema and Shakespeare seems unusual, if not antithetical, with the former associated with low-brow popular entertainment and the latter with high-brow literary culture. This is, of course a binary that does not hold up, and in many ways contemporary Bollywood is perhaps the closest modern analogue to the early modern theatre industry in terms of their popularity among the masses, the quantity and speed of output and the unapologetic borrowing of source material. This similarity applies not just to the functioning of the industries but to the content, plots and narrative tropes used by both. The inception, development and consolidation of the Indian film industry (though it was not declared an industry until 1998) took place over the same period of time as the anti-colonial movement; the birth of Indian cinema occurred almost simultaneously with the birth of the Indian nation. A number of the studies dealing with Hindi film, therefore, focus on its relationship to, and role in, the construction of the nation. Historical studies trace the development of Hindi cinema from popular Parsi theatre in Bombay at the turn of the twentieth century, placing the inception of the industry firmly within a performance tradition of hybridity that drew on legends, epics and, folktales ranging from The Arabian Nights to Shakespeare. Tejaswini Ganti presents this relationship as dominant in conceiving of the origins and development of Indian film:

two. I do, however, use the term “Hindi popular cinema” more often than “Indian popular cinema.” While I suspect that the claims I am making are largely true for this type of commercial cinema across the country (partly because a lot of Hindi films are remakes of regional blockbusters), I lack the language ability and knowledge to adequately confirm it. I am however cognizant of the gap between the tradition that I am delineating and the film that forms the focus of this chapter. Most of what I trace belongs to the field of Hindi popular cinema, but Arshinagar is (at least marketed as) a Bengali film. This is precisely the point that I hope to prove: that Arshinagar is, at least partially shaped by this tradition, a consequence in part of the tremendous influence of Hindi popular cinema across the country.

18 These include, among others, Rachel Dwyer’s Bollywood’s India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Contemporary India; Priya Jaikumar’s Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India; Iyotika Virdi’s The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History; R.Vasudevan’s The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema; Sumita Chakravarty’s National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947-1987 and Tejaswini Ganti’s Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema.
With its assimilation of diverse influences—Shakespeare, Persian lyric poetry, Indian folk traditions, and Sanskrit drama; an operatic structure integrating songs into the narrative; dominant genres being the historical, mythological and romantic melodrama; and use of the Urdu language, Parsi Theatre was the immediate aesthetic and cultural antecedent of popular Hindi cinema (8).

*Romeo and Juliet* seems to be a play that is especially suited to Indian popular cinema: warring families, obstructive parents, young doomed love, quarrels, suicide—these features seem to be an intrinsic part of the typical Bollywood film. The earliest Indian cinematic adaptation was *Ambikapathy*, a 1937 Tamil film, and in the eighty years since, *Romeo and Juliet* has been a source text that Indian filmmakers have frequently turned to, though not always with acknowledgment, and that Indian filmgoers have frequently utilized as a framework or reference for interpreting these films. This is not to say, however, that every Indian film that seems, however tangentially, to adopt the story of the star-crossed lovers is ultimately indebted to Shakespeare. To start with, this would—given the manner in which the Indian film industry has functioned and continues to function—be impossible to prove. Equally, such a blanket claim would seriously undervalue the potential influences of other tales of star-crossed lovers in the Indian folk and mythic archives like Laila and Majnu, Heer and Ranjha, Mirza and Sahiba, Sohni and Mahiwal, which are frequently made into films as well.

I am arguing, however, for the existence of a category of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations in Indian cinema. These films, that straddle the line between familiarity and novelty, are neighbors—refracted, distorted, and repeated versions of each other—and have shaped the way in which young lovers are portrayed in Indian cinema. While the tragic story of a pair of star-crossed lovers has been a popular trope in Indian popular cinema, it has not previously been
suggested that there is a distinct group of films constituting a field of *Romeo and Juliet*
adaptations. In making just such a suggestion, I do not want to forward a privileging of the
Shakespearean text, but rather to open up avenues of comparative study by sketching the broad
contours of this field. I want to demonstrate that these films share more than a common core
narrative, specifically with respect to the choices made in the process of adaptation.

From the 1970s onwards, there were several Indian films that had young doomed love as
a central plotline, ranging from Raj Kapoor’s tremendously successful *Bobby* (1973), which set
up the romantic relationship between a wealthy Hindu boy and a poor Goan Christian girl; to K.
Balachander’s *Ek Duje Ke Liye* (Made for Each Other, 1981), which set up the romantic
relationship between a North Indian girl and a South Indian boy; to Mansoor Khan’s *Qayamat Se
Qayamat Tak* (From Judgement Day to Judgement Day, 1988) a landmark film that set up the
romantic relationship between the children of two feuding Rajput families. There were also
several films based on indigenous folk tales and legends that contained a similar story of star-
crossed lovers like the Punjabi tale of *Heer Ranjha* (1970) and the Persian tale of *Laila Majnu*
(1976).

Shakespeare, in these films, is figured as that familiar yet distorted image in the mirror, as
we recognize and grasp moments of direct translation, oblique citation or vague echoes. The
references to the Shakespearean text within the dialogue or narrative of the film emphasize a link
while also providing viewers with a discursive framework for interpretation. For some of these
films, particularly those that don’t explicitly acknowledge the Shakespearean text as a source, the
resemblance is largely in the plot and the prominent tropes. For instance, *Qayamat Se Qayamat
Tak*, suffused with a sense of tragic inevitability, replicates some of the iconic moments of
*Romeo and Juliet* like their first encounter at a party where Raj enters as an uninvited and
disguised guest. In other instances, *Romeo and Juliet* is invoked in the form of direct quotation. In *Ek Duje Ke Liye*, Sapna, very early on, purchases a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* at a bookstore. Later, her father, a professor expounds on the significance of the lines: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet” (2.2.1-2). In *1942: A Love Story*, the play-within-a-film, though never explicitly named as such is a translation of *Romeo and Juliet* and Naren, playing the role of Romeo, emphatically states: “*Naam badal do meri par mein mein hi rahunga*” (“You can change my name but I’ll still remain myself”). Instead of addressing his onstage counterpart, he focuses on Rajjo, the prompter. These hints, through famous bits of dialogue or set pieces, like the balcony, suggest a connection to the Shakespeare play that invites viewers to use *Romeo and Juliet* as a reference point for the film. However, all these films, whether explicitly using the Shakespeare text or not, tried to distance themselves from the cultural cachet accompanying the Shakespeare label in an attempt to produce popular entertainment.

In a departure from this tradition, Habib Faisal’s *Ishaqzaade* (*Rebellious Lovers*, 2012); Manish Tiwary’s *Issaq* (*Love*, 2013); Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s *Goliyon Ki Ras Leela Ram-Leela* (*A Play of Bullets Ram-Leela*, 2013); and Aparna Sen’s *Arshinagar* (2015) all market themselves as adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* and specifically as local, contemporary, and modern retellings. One of the most recent iterations, a web series called *Romil and Jugal* (2017), which reworks the central relationship as one between two gay men, brings together several of the elements that are present in other versions, particularly underscoring the overlaps between the “*filmi-ness*” of Bollywood and a perceived melodramatic undercurrent in Shakespeare’s love story. This contemporary trend of self-conscious references to Shakespeare in the paratextual materials accompanying the films is a product of the global expansion of Shakespeare’s cultural

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capital beyond the exclusive purview of high-brow entertainment to include the popular. This accords a secondary and derivative status to these films, dismissing not just the presence of a range of other intertexts, but also papering over alternative relationships to Shakespeare.

*Arshinagar* forms a part of this “neighborhood” of films and is consciously in conversation with its aesthetic, linguistic, and narrative traditions. In this section, I consider two related characteristics of the desification of *Romeo and Juliet*: the influence of desi and international versions of the same story and the impact of a dominant interpretive framework. I am positing, therefore, that analyzing this group of films that bear both pertinent and attested likenesses to *Romeo and Juliet* will help us trace not just the different avenues and modes through which the Shakespearean text was adapted to a modern Indian context, but will also outline the circuits through which these films have shaped and influenced each other, as well as a received understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* in contemporary India.

This prolific group of films is largely a consequence of the way in which the film industry functions in India. Remakes are extremely popular, and based on the commercial success of films, they are often dubbed or remade in different languages in order to reach a wider or different audience. Box-office success is prized above originality and, as a consequence, filmmakers have few qualms about borrowing or reutilizing material that has proven to be successful in a different context or at a different time. Thus, an equally rich archive for source material is to be found in other adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. While contemporary Indian adaptations replicate successful narrative devices and tropes from other Indian films that may or may not have themselves been influenced, however tangentially, by *Romeo and Juliet*, they also

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19 Reviews of the Urdu 1947 *Romeo and Juliet* compare the performance of Nargis (who played Juliet) with that of Norma Shearer who had played Juliet in an American movie a decade earlier. Given what we know of the functioning of the Indian film industry at that time, it’s very likely that the Urdu version relied to a certain extent on the American film that preceded it.
draw prominently from three of the most international popular filmic versions of the play: Franco Zefferelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), the film version of *West Side Story* (1961), and Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). For instance, *Josh* (Passion, 2000) is for all intents and purposes a remake of *West Side Story* featuring a similar antagonism between two gangs who control different territories of the town, Goa and New York respectively. Other recent adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* repeatedly visually echo the aesthetic choices of these three films. The lush, exotic and over-the-top sets of Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* (2013) brings to mind Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*. For instance, Juliet’s balcony, in *Romeo + Juliet*, overlooks a swimming pool, she is frequently clad in white while Romeo wears loosely buttoned Hawaiian shirts, choices that are mirrored in Bhansali’s film.

Perhaps most obviously, *Arshinagar* joins this field in its utilization and citation of films that preceded it, both in India and abroad. Rono is referred to at one point as “Ishaqzaade” (rebellious lover), the title given to the most recent Hindi version of *Romeo and Juliet*. His guitar-playing motorbike-riding persona is reminiscent of Raj (the Romeo character) in *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*. The graffitied sets and the color-coded gangs (the Mitras in red and the Khans in black) are indisputably influenced by the sets and the portrayal of the gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, in *West Side Story* and, perhaps tangentially, by the Bollywood version *Josh*. Luhrmann’s imagery haunts the film too—our introduction to the different characters is accompanied by a voiceover; the massive buildings of the two enterprises, Mitra and Khan, mirror those of the Montagues and Capulets on Verona Beach; the endings of both films depict the two sets of grieving parents pulling up in black cars. The joint funeral at the end, with the
bodies carried in on stretchers—each covered in the custom of their faith—recalls the ending of *Zefferelli’s Romeo and Juliet.*

The connection between these films and the narrative of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is not restricted to plot echoes or citations within the films but extends beyond the film to the interpretive framework that viewers have utilized to receive and review these movies. Though Shakespeare has been part of the English Literature curriculum in Indian schools and colleges since the late-nineteenth century, for a large section of the population this is not the only, or primary, frame of reference for *Romeo and Juliet.* This tragedy has acquired an afterlife that is no longer bound to the Shakespearean text, as lines from the play have been absorbed into

![Figure 9 The joint funeral in Arshinagar](image)

> The joint funeral in *Arshinagar*

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20 In her talk, “Image as Text in *Arshinagar* (2015): A Bengali Experiment with Shakespeare” at the 2016 Indian Shakespeares on Screen conference, Koel Chatterjee listed these among several filmic citations in *Arshinagar* (largely from Zefferelli’s *Romeo and Juliet*, *Westside Story*, and *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*), arguing that this rich layering of references transformed the “image into text” for contemporary consumers of Shakespeare.
quotidian English and the lovers have become synonymous with a purportedly classic and universal idea of tragic, yet pure, love. If there is a text that Indian filmmakers turn to, it is more likely to be the prose retelling of Charles and Mary Lamb that retains some of the Shakespearean text’s most memorable dialogue but otherwise condenses the play into an eighteen-page descriptive narrative. Thus, despite an absence of any overt references to the play in the films, there is an almost automatic association between tragic lovers and *Romeo and Juliet*. Paradoxically, therefore, while the Shakespeare label was considered an economic liability, audiences all too readily attach the label of *Romeo and Juliet*, sometimes even in cases where there is no discernible link.

This association of *Romeo and Juliet* with archetypal lovers circulates not just in the media and in films that rehearse a similar plot. References to the couple abound in Hindi songs that often circulate independent of their original movies. The movie *Baazigar* (*Gambler, 1993*) a crime thriller that is considered the breakthrough film for Bollywood’s most popular onscreen couple in the 1990s—Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol—contains a brief reference to Juliet in one of its most popular songs, “*Yeh Kaali Kaali Aankhein*” (“These Black Eyes”). When describing the beloved’s features, the singer declares:

> My beloved, your face has Laila’s vividness

> Your eyes are more intoxicating than Heer’s

> Your lips are scarlet like Juliet’s.

Juliet joins the ranks of Laila, from the Persian tale of *Laila and Majnu* and Heer from the Punjabi legend of *Heer Ranjha*, all of whom perished in the name of love. These lines are perhaps meant to point to the tragic conclusion of the heroine’s own love story, but, more

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Chehre peh tere sanam, Laila ki hai shokhiyaan/ Heer se bhadke hain, aankhon ki yeh mastiyaan/ Juliet ke tarah hoton pe hai surkhiyaan (my translation).
important for my purposes here, is the inclusion of Juliet alongside other archetypal lovers with a
deep history in India’s folk and mythic archive. These stories were made into films numerous
times, mostly around the 1970s. There is no mention of or explicit reference to Romeo and Juliet
in these films, and they were set at a temporal remove from the conditions of production, in a
mythic or historical time period. However, the most recent film Mirzya (2016), which draws on
the tale of Mirza Sahiba, another Punjabi tragic romance, makes use of Shakespearean dialogue
in translation. I would argue, therefore, that Romeo and Juliet has not just joined an archive of
indigenous legends of star-crossed lovers, but has, to a large degree, become a dominant frame of
reference for Indian filmmakers and viewers even if they have not actually read the Shakespeare
play.

However, Romeo and Juliet circulates not just in variations or versions of the plot, the
names of the lovers have been desified and have acquired a life and a set of associations of their
own. The English language media in India frequently uses the Romeo-Juliet reference when
reporting cases of honor killings or supposed love jihad (also called Romeo jihad), the latter
referring to a conspiracy theory regarding an alleged activity undertaken by young Muslim men
who feign love to non-Muslim girls in an attempt to get them to convert. In fact, the unpleasant
connotations of the term “Romeo” form the primary meaning associated with the name as it is
frequently used to describe young men who make a practice of harassing women on the streets. It
is interesting to note that Rono is referred to as a “Romeo” in Arshinagar by his friends,
immediately identifying him as a layabout. The recent promotion of “Anti-Romeo Squads” in
India’s most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, ostensibly to protect the honor of women, gives
credence to this particular connotation of the name.
When taken as a pair, however, “Romeo-Juliet” most often refers to an unconventional marriage or couple, whether they have a happy ending or not—from a young lesbian couple in Mumbai, to the high profile accused murderers Peter and Indrani Mukerjea, to the Punjabi inter-caste couple who, fearing an honor killing, fled to Australia as refugees. Romeo-Juliet, and not any other pair of names, has become the dominant shorthand in English-language journalism to refer to any transgressive couple. It is not the Shakespearean play that undergirds this perception, but rather its dominant critical interpretation in which a young couple’s love is not understood or permitted by society’s norms. This “dominant or authoritative interpretation of the text” is what Lawrence Venuti has suggested is the missing category in studies of adaptations that tend to privilege a unitary relationship between original and adaptation (26). Desified adaptations like Arshinagar, therefore must be analyzed while taking into account this more layered context. It is not simply an Indian adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, but rather an adaptation of Romeo and Juliet in a context where the preconceptions and associations that accrue around the play, its central plotline, and its characters, constitute a very particular archive.

Desi adaptations of Romeo and Juliet in film thus provide us with a site for reimagining the conceptual and critical category of adaptation beyond one that relies exclusively on an individual genealogical relationship between “original” and “copy.” The category of adaptation is, therefore, infinitely more complex, comprising multiple sources or intertexts and multiple avenues or modes of transformation. In Indian popular cinema, adaptation is thus a sedimentary layering of influence: a character from here, a trope from there, a line from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, an image from Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet. To use Gerard Genette’s terminology, there is no single hypotext or anterior text that the adaptation “transforms, modifies,
elaborates or extends” (Stam and Raengo 31). It may be more useful, in this instance, then to think of a web of hypotexts that exist in some relation to each other and to the adaptation—a neighborhood of texts. Utilizing this model requires not just a decentering of the Shakespearean text but also a cognizance of the neighboring texts whose traces, influences, reflections, and refractions may be observed in the adaptation. This reconceptualization shares the move towards “decentered multiplicity” forwarded in recent theorizations of the Shakespeare rhizome by such critics as Douglas M. Lanier and Alexa Joubin. The Shakespeare rhizome is a model that goes beyond the Shakespeare texts and “necessarily includes faithful and unfaithful adaptations, and adaptations of them, and adaptations of them” (Lanier 28-29). What this alternative model of the Shakespeare rhizome requires is for us to “conceive of our shared object of study . . . as the vast web of adaptations, allusions, and (re)productions that comprises the ever-changing cultural phenomenon we call ‘Shakespeare’” (Lanier 29).

What the theorization of the neighbor and the neighborhood opens up instead is a space for considering the ethical charge both of our orientation as scholars and of the relationship(s) between these various “adaptations, allusions, and (re)productions.” To conceive of these relationships as neighborly and to conceive of discrete groups as neighborhoods requires us to consider not just lines of influence, but also the paradoxical potential for proliferation and contraction: an adaptation both replaces and extends the putative original. To analyze Arshinagar within the framework of a neighborhood of Indian Romeo and Juliet adaptations is then not just to disclose citational traces or lines of influence, but to consider how it neighbors these adaptations.

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22 Both Robert Stam and Linda Hutcheon in their work on adaptation theory utilize Gerard Genette’s taxonomy of transtextuality, one that delineates the different types of relationships between texts, in order to point to the inherently palimpsestuous nature of adaptations.
Neighboring Tales

A look at the way in which desi adaptations of Romeo and Juliet have changed over the years serves to function as a snapshot of the very concerns that underpin Jyotika Virdi’s study of Hindi popular cinema as narrating the “nation and/as family” (34). In her monograph The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History, Virdi suggests that Indian popular cinema maps the social, political, and historical concerns of national identity onto the cinematic family. This is particularly evident in the way that the films choose to represent the catalytic feud between the families. In Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, we are given no context for this feud between the families. The fact that the Montagues and Capulets are sworn enemies is common knowledge amongst all the citizens of Verona, but the reason behind this quarrel is neither questioned nor provided. This gap in knowledge has proven a particularly rich site for elaboration and amplification in filmic adaptations of the play, allowing filmmakers to set up the feud within a framework of topical social divides. Bobby (1973) ostensibly sets up the conflict between a Hindu boy, Raj and a Christian girl, Bobby, but the real conflict is one of class. Bobby’s father is a fisherman while Raj’s father is a wealthy businessman and it is this divide that forms the crux of the film and the barrier to their marriage. Though the lovers attempt suicide, they are rescued by their fathers and the inter-class union is permitted. The film thus valorizes this connection between the lovers as transcending material difference, portraying the parents as motivated by outward appearances.

Ek Duje Ke Liye (1981) itself a remake of a Telegu film, depicts the two families as squabbling neighbors whose daily quarrels are a comic characterization of India’s language battles. Sapna’s parents are North Indian, Hindi speaking and meat eating, whereas Vasu’s parents are South Indian, Tamil speaking and vegetarian. Their parents, in particular her mother
and his father, disapprove of the others’ lifestyles. Though the young couple are clearly attracted to each other they can barely communicate and have to use English phrases and broken Hindi to cobble together a conversation. Significantly, it is Vasu who has to make the most visible compromise, learning the language in an attempt to please his bride-to-be and to impress his future in-laws. He returns from the year-long separation imposed on them by their parents fluent in Hindi and all its variations from Bombaiya to Bhojpuri—shifting seamlessly from one to the next. It appears, during this period of exile, that he has “conquered” the languages of northern India. Though Vasu and Sapna meet the tragic end of Romeo and Juliet, their deaths appear to have more to do with a series of delayed communications rather than being emblematic of a fundamental discord between their identities. This depiction of Vasu and Sapna as representative of particular regional identities, though his was specific and hers more generic, dramatizes the conflict between Tamil, a Dravidian language spoken in Tamil Nadu, and Hindi, a Sanskrit language spoken across a large swathe of North India, over the last eighty years. Tamilians have repeatedly resisted the imposition of Hindi as a national language, a resistance that has led to organized protests several times over the last eight decades. The film picks up on this social and political issue, one that certainly has comic potential, in the context of a love story. The fact that Vasu can only be a suitable groom once he learns Hindi and comes to resemble a generic North Indian remains one of the film’s problematic assertions.

The 1994 film 1942: A Love Story is set in a period defined by India’s struggle for freedom. The young couple, Naren and Rajjo, have their love story played out against the backdrop of the actions of a group of revolutionary freedom fighters who are part of the Quit India Movement. Naren is the son of a local politician who depends on the British government for the advancement of his career. Their outward appearances, their home, and their material
wealth all bear the mark of Westernization. Rajjo, on the other hand, is the daughter of a revolutionary, the mastermind behind the plot to assassinate General Douglas, a tyrannical British officer responsible for the deaths of several Indians. Naren’s journey, from a politically unaware and spoilt young man to a revolutionary, parallels their love story. The “love story” in the title of the film thus applies at once to the intense and private affection between the young couple and Naren’s growing awareness of what is referred to in the movie as “desh prem” (literally love for one’s country) or patriotism.

More recent movies have focused instead on a religious or caste-based divide between the families, turning towards a form of explicit social critique. These include Ishaqzaade (2013) a film that sets up a feud between the Chauhans and Qureshis, political rivals who also belong to different religions—Hindu and Muslim. After the young couple end their lives amidst a violent gun battle between the two political factions, choosing to kill each other with love rather than be killed by those who hate them, there is no resolution and reconciliation for the surviving families. The film ends with an explicit social message: “More than a thousand Ishaqzaades [rebellious lovers] like Parma and Zoya are punished with brutal death in our country every year. Their only sin falling in love outside their religion or caste.” Both Sairat (Wild, 2016)23, a critically acclaimed Marathi film, and Ishaqzaade focus on social edicts that keep young lovers apart, portraying in all its gore the prevalent social evil of honor killings. Thus, the catalytic feud between the Montagues and Capulets is desified: from class in Bobby, to language in Ek Duje Ke Liye to patriotic loyalty in 1942: A Love Story to religion in Ishaqzaade.

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23 Sairat achieved unusual popularity for a regional film, becoming the first Marathi film to gross more than $15 million globally. Apart from depicting the tragic love story of a young couple, Sairat seems to have little to do with Romeo and Juliet. However, parts of it clearly evoke Ishaqzaade and Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak and it has repeatedly been referred to in reviews as the Marathi Romeo and Juliet.
The tendency in almost all the films that bear the stamp of the *Romeo and Juliet* plot has been to privilege the male character; his development provides the film’s central narrative arc. In *1942: A Love Story*, the film follows Naren’s development from an ignorant and spoilt young man to one who is willing to martyr himself for the nation’s cause; in *Ek Duje Ke Liye* the film follows Vasu’s development from an unemployed idler unable to speak Hindi to an employed independent man fluent in the language; in *Ishaqzaade* we follow the development of Parma from a selfish crude young man interested only in the performance of his own masculinity to one who is attentive to the needs and feelings of others. In *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*, possibly the most influential of all these films, we are introduced via a song to Raj (Romeo), at the celebration of his college graduation. This song frames the narrative as one where we as viewers simultaneously both know and don’t know what is going to happen. Raj is at the cusp of entering adult life, he doesn’t know where he’s headed, his only dream is that of a beautiful face. He ends the song claiming he will make a name for himself in *dil ki duniya* (the world of the heart), that this will be his life’s work, foreshadowing the story that follows. Rashmi, the female protagonist, does not enter the film until twenty-seven minutes in and our first glimpse of her is also from Raj’s perspective. We are thus, from the very beginning of the film, called upon to identify and sympathize with Raj—it is his life we are following, it is his future we are invested and interested in. Thus, in almost all of these films, the development of the female protagonist, if at all present, is relegated to secondary importance in terms of the plot. On the whole, the women remain unchanged, often functioning as catalysts for a fundamental change in their male counterparts. The women are already perfect, possibly why they are desired as prizes to be won, or their imperfections are easily erased by a union with the hero.
Equally, configurations of what is possible and what is not are thus almost always defined in terms of gender: successful and lasting unions always seem to involve the male protagonist in the normative position. In his response to the controversy surrounding *Bombay* (1995) the film best known for bridging the Hindu-Muslim divide in the inter-religious marriage of its protagonists, screenwriter and lyricist Javed Akhtar claimed that the greater taboo in popular cinema is a relationship in which the girl occupies the normative position: “The real taboo is that a high-case Hindu girl will never be shown marrying an outcaste boy. Never. If at all the great caste divide has to be bridged, it will be done via a high-caste boy falling in love with an outcaste girl. . . Similarly, the one who rebels against the Hindu-Muslim divide will never be the Hindu woman, it will be the Hindu man. Ratnam’s *Bombay* also bears this out” (quoted in Panjwani). In instances where this divide is breached, like in *Sairat*, the ending rarely provides a happy resolution. The “two households” do not recognize the harm that they have been causing to larger society and civil strife continues beyond the confines of the film’s narrative.

I argue that *Arshinagar* draws on, extends, complicates and counters these characteristics of desified adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. The films utilize one of the industry’s core cinematic tropes—heterosexual, romantic, and transgressive love—in their exploration of this nation-as-family metaphor and function simultaneously as a barometer for dominant social concerns. *Arshinagar* follows in this tradition by mapping the conflict between the two families onto contemporary religious strife between Hindus and Muslims. *Arshinagar* similarly continues in the tradition of depicting Romeo as a wastrel: Rono fashions himself as a musician, has remained in his third year of college for four consecutive years, and shows no interest in associating with his father’s business though he is quite happy to reap the material benefits.
Meeting Julie provides the necessary catalyst for him to fully disengage himself from his father’s shady business dealings and to consider and plan an independent future.

Julie is, however, given equal space in terms of character development. Our first glimpse is of her getting angel wings tattooed onto her back, later hidden by her conservative clothing. These wings on the one hand serve as a visual echo of Juliet’s angel wings in Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet—one of many citations of the film in Arshinagar. More significantly, however, we get an early indication of Julie’s rebellious and adventurous nature at curious odds with her innocent and sheltered upbringing. Before meeting Rono, this is as far as she goes: getting a tattoo (and then hiding it) or performing as a man in an amateur production at home. She remains to her friends relatively inexperienced and lacking in worldly wisdom. She acknowledges that Rono’s kiss is the first she’s ever received and though she swiftly joins him on a secret motorcycle ride, she then cannot bring herself to have a conversation with him. By the end of the movie, however, she has changed. Emboldened by her secret love affair, she becomes more daring, more openly rebellious. This is in keeping with Sen’s oeuvre, which features a host of complex and agential female characters, often from marginalized sections of society, both within the domestic sphere and in public life.24

Though Arshinagar appears to replicate the dominant dynamic of transgressive relationships in its portrayal of a Hindu Romeo and a Muslim Juliet, embedded in the film’s flashbacks is another version of the same story: Rono’s mother and Julie’s father were once in love and planned to marry, with his mother going as far as agreeing to convert to Islam. In the present, Madhu Mitra is sympathetic towards her son’s relationship while Sabir Khan is not. His

24 See Paroma (The Ultimate Woman, 1985), Paromitar Ek Din (House of Memories, 2000), Goynar Baksho (The Jewelry Box, 2013), 36 Chowringhee Lane (1981), Mr and Mrs Iyer (2002), and Sati (1989) among others.
failed romance resulted in an increased devotion to his faith and he tells his daughter that there is
no question of her marrying a Hindu. Madhu and Sabir’s failed romance is wrenched into the
present of the film when we see, hidden in a safe, the scrap of paper Madhu has preserved for
thirty years, containing the Hindi words: *Mujhse shaadi karogi?* (Will you marry me?). This is
not just the title of a popular Hindi movie but has become a line that is associated with Hindi
popular cinema more broadly, an example of “filmi dialogue,” further consolidating
*Arshinagar’s* contiguous relationship with Hindi popular cinema.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 10 Mujhse shaadi karogi? (Will you marry me?)**

According to Sen, this mirror relationship in the previous generation serves to
demonstrate that nothing has changed in thirty years, that Hindu-Muslim relationships continue
to be doomed to fail. There is, however, a difference. Madhu and Sabir buckle under parental
pressure and the present shows them in conventional marriages with members of their own
community. Rono and Julie on the other hand, do manage to thwart their parents and
consummate their relationship; it is communal violence that ultimately proves their greatest obstacle. The relationship between Madhu and Sabir is one demonized in popular depictions of love jihad—a conspiracy theory regarding an alleged activity undertaken by young Muslim men who feign love to non-Muslim women in an attempt to get them to convert, one that is symptomatic of the fear of losing the woman, as bearer of cultural and religious values, to the Other. Conversion, for Rono and Julie on the other hand, is never brought up—they discuss their dreams for the future, how they will make a living, what they will eat, even drawing out a floor plan of their first home, but religion is never mentioned. It only becomes significant when the riots begin, when they cannot escape from religious categorization and the possibility that they will be seen, perceived as a threat, and immediately eliminated.  

*Arshinagar* thus works out different trajectories for what is ostensibly the same story, simultaneously marking out points of convergence and divergence. These neighboring tales are distinct not merely because of a generational gap, but more importantly because of the mirrored gender roles. In Madhu and Sabir’s doomed relationship, the film points to a configuration rarely depicted as successful in Indian *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations, in which the man is a social minority, i.e. Muslim, lower-class, or lower-caste. It is significant that Rono and Julie’s relationship—the one at the center of the film and the one that we, as audience members, are meant to identify with—depicts the reverse of the love jihad dynamic. This is a plausible configuration, in which the other can be assimilated into the dominant community simply because she is female, while the reverse is barely entertained. By including both, ultimately

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25 In her paper, “Shakespeare and Cultural Appropriation: The Case of Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haider* and Aparna Sen’s *Arshinagar,*” circulated at the Shakespeare and Cultural Appropriation Seminar at SAA 2019, Shormistha Panja also argues for an important distinction between the two inter-religious couples. She suggests that the difference between the two generations is a product of encroaching globalization and capitalism that have rendered older ties—like those of family and religion—meaningless.
unsuccessful, configurations, *Arshinagar* encapsulates the dominant trend for depicting transgressive relationships in Indian popular cinema. These neighboring pairings invite markedly different responses, resulting in a restricted understanding of what a socially transgressive relationship in contemporary India can look like.

Studies of gender and the Indian nation have largely been limited to the colonial period and Partition, where the literal division of the country was enacted in the form of physical violence on women’s bodies. While India in popular imagery is depicted as female—Bharat Mata—this is generally an upper caste Hindu female and it follows a popular trope of the birth of the nation where “women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but denied any direct relation to national agency” (McClintock 90). Other studies, like Sikata Banerjee’s *Make Me A Man!* have focused on gender within a particular religiously constructed nationalism, in her case Hindutva. She sketches the broad distinction between two types of nationalisms: civic, where one’s allegiance is to an ideology, and cultural, where one’s allegiance is to a particular identity, racial, ethnic, religious, or linguistic (4). In India, this marks a division between the secular and the communal. These studies tend to focus on gender relations within the context of a cultural nationalism but have not really looked at what this might offer us in considering civic nationalism or more specifically, understanding the dynamic between different “cultural nationalisms.” These studies thus articulate a gendered division in the depiction of the nation and its citizens, where the former is conceived of as possessing maternal and feminine attributes, the normative Indian citizen is always a man.

There is thus a complex overlap and tension between religion and gender in contemporary desified versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. In other words, the generic Indian citizen is a heterosexual upper-caste North Indian Hindu male, suggesting that the Muslim can only ever
be assimilated into the *des* in a secondary or subordinate (read: feminized) role. It would be simplistic to suggest that gender maps directly onto religion in *Arshinagar*, but there is a repeated pattern of Hindu masculinity and Muslim femininity. The Khan family is a predominantly female household, consisting of Sabir’s grandmother, his sister, his wife, two daughters married and living abroad, Julie, and Tayeb, his sister’s son. Sabir Khan, while perhaps not effeminate is certainly portrayed as refined, cultured and soft-spoken in comparison to the crude and blustering Bishu Mitra. Even amongst the slum-dwellers, it is Fati, Julie’s nurse who represents the interests of the Muslims, while Manik, the teashop owner and the *purohit* (priest) represent those of the Hindus. Tayeb (Tybalt) provides a particularly interesting test case for this association. His volatile personality and his penchant for killing using a knife rather than a gun\(^{26}\) indicates an aggressive hypermasculinity. However, he is plagued by the fact that he is *asrito*—sheltered by his maternal relations and therefore perceived as dependent and emasculated.

In *Arshinagar*’s bloody riot scenes—what the Minister of Urban Development dismisses as a natural response after “religious sentiments [are] hurt,”—there are echoes both of the riots that swept across the nation following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and subsequent filmic representations of it like Mani Ratnam’s *Bombay*.\(^{27}\) *Arshinagar* is, without question, engaging in the concerns surrounding the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in contemporary India, but the riots at the end of the film are only one example. Throughout the narrative, particularly in the depiction of its two protagonists, the film reflects, interrogates and

\(^{26}\)He says, “*Dur theke je guli chalai, she sala durpoke*” (He who shoot from a distance is a coward’s son).

\(^{27}\) Rono and Julie are, for Sen, another version of the Hindu-Muslim young couple in her film *Mr and Mrs Iyer*, whose ephemeral love story takes place amidst religious riot when Mrs Iyer, a conservative Tamil Brahmin, lends Jehangir Chowdhury, a Bengali Muslim, her name to save his life.
undermines preconceptions surrounding religious identity, particularly as they relate to gendered dynamics of power within the contemporary Indian nation. Precisely by compelling its viewers to confront both the constructedness of gender through the doubled cross-dressing of its protagonists and the range of permissibility accorded to socially transgressive unions, *Arshinagar* both highlights the double standards that inform the depiction of love onscreen while still placing its narrative within those prescribed boundaries.

*Arshinagar*, thus, deploys many of the same desifying moves found in other adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, and like other recent versions, it self-consciously aligns itself with the Shakespearean text—acknowledging the source, retaining most of the same characters and at times even utilizing the language of the play, albeit in translation—and engages with its popular desi associations. The film also has as its central motif a state in turmoil: asking not only who belongs and who does not, but how we live together and relate to each other. In the following sections I focus on two elements of the film—its depiction of the nation and its experimental use of language—that demonstrate how *Arshinagar* both disturbs and preserves what constitutes an Indian adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. I argue that while *Arshinagar* reflects dominant social concerns of contemporary India, i.e. the religious tension between Hindus and Muslims, in its formal, thematic, and linguistic characteristics the film goes one step further, making a claim about how we conceive of the, sometimes competing, allegiances to communities. The film thus both engages with a harsh reality and endeavors to interrogate the assumptions and divisions that engender this reality.

**Locating *Arshinagar*: The Nation as Neighborhood**

*Arshinagar*’s investment in idealism, in the values of empathy and unity, is coupled with a disavowal of realistic cinematic technique: a focus, in Sen’s words, on the “real emotions and
conflict” rather than the “everyday realism” prevalent in film (Interview). This entailed drawing on theatrical devices like the framing device of the puppet show, rhyming dialogue, painted backdrops, stylized fight sequences and the repeated breaking of the fourth wall. Partha Chatterjee has described this film as being “brilliantly innovative” in its daring combination of “the natural realism of the cinema” and “the staged dramatic narrative of the theatre.” The walls of the rooms have painted screens depicting bookshelves and wardrobes, a flashback scene depicting kite flying in Lucknow has a painted skyline as its backdrop, Rono and Julie’s daydream of their future in Bombay takes place in front of painted skyscrapers depicting the city’s coast. While other desi versions like 1942: A Love Story and Romil and Jugal, have included a-play-within-a-film, often Romeo and Juliet itself, that echoes the dynamics between the characters-as-actors, Arshinagar does something completely different as it skirts the boundary between cinema and theatre. The entire production is both a play and a film, melding and shifting between the performance techniques of each.

The genre of the adaptation makes this experimentation possible, providing viewers with the pleasure that comes “from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual with the piquancy of surprise” (Hutcheon 4). Adaptation thus is not limited to the transformation of material, from a single or multiple source[s]. It also provides a particularly rich site for formal experimentation, and the utilization of a familiar story expands the potential for such experimentation. While Arshinagar cites, imitates and transforms elements from prior iterations of Romeo and Juliet, it also sets itself apart from them, providing not just a fresh interpretation of the Shakespearean text but also extending the process of adaptation to the medium itself.

A particularly telling moment involves the slum dwellers staring directly into the camera during the song “Kaala Paisa Wala” (“Black Money People”), a song that critiques the upper
classes’ corruption and their exploitation of the lower classes. This is an indictment of the viewers, who are likely seated in malls built on the detritus of former slums, in the same cycle of exploitation. These theatrical devices make for a jarring juxtaposition with the very real and recognizable prejudice and violence that shapes the lives of the characters. It is paradoxically very difficult to get lost in the fiction of the film as we are constantly reminded that it is not real, and this awareness sharpens our ability to analyze, interpret, critique and reflect. This disavowal of realism is the literal realization of a Mirrorland that is both familiar, but at the same time intangible.

Figure 11 The slum dwellers break the fourth wall

The framing device of the film is a puppet show performed at a fairground; the characters begin as puppets who then materialize into flesh and blood actors—one of the many ways in which Arshinagar plays with the proximate performance techniques of film and theatre. We are, however, periodically reminded of the frame throughout the film through Reshma Bai, the
puppeteer’s, pauses and interruptions. Played by the same actor as Julie’s nurse, Fatema, a resident of the Arshinagar slum, Reshma Bai never clarifies for us whether she has lived and experienced this tale and then converted it into a puppet show, or whether it is merely the fairy-tale she suggests it is in the beginning. The brightly lit, musical, and colorful surrounding of the fairground provides an environment of magical escapism, at a remove from everyday life. The setting of the story reinforces this sense of fantasy or unreality and it is only at the end of the film, when the scrap of paper containing the drawing of Rono and Julie’s fantasy home in Bombay appears in Reshma Bai’s hands, that we are compelled to question that blurred boundary between fact and fiction.

The film takes pains to establish Arshinagar as an unspecified location that is at once nowhere and everywhere, not real but at the same time not unknown (Sen Interview). The puppeteer-narrator, Reshma Bai, informs her audience at the outset: “Koi bhi thakte pare, Bangal, Bihar, MP, Orissa” (“It could be anywhere, West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa”), underscoring the equivalence between Arshinagar and today’s India. The film thus slips between concentric circles of geographic boundedness—the stage, the town, the neighborhood, the region, the country, and the universal or the abstract, its shifting registers making apparent the simultaneous universality and particularity of its narrative. The puppet show suggests that this tale is of a more universal nature, blending a fairytale quality with a privileging of place over character, of locality over personality, of Arshinagar over Rono and Julie. It is the very universality of the tale that serves to unmoor it from reality as, right before the scene shifts to the material reality of Arshinagar, Reshma Bai, the puppeteer, tells her gathered fairground audience that everyone has an “arshinagar” within themselves. She thereby moves Arshinagar

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28 My translation.
from anywhere/everywhere to within the minds of the audience—a subjective interiority where they will see themselves reflected. The strong implication over here is that this production, this realization of an abstract “arshinagar,” will ensure that the members of the audience see themselves reflected and will, hopefully, reflect on themselves.

Figure 12 The barbershop in the Arshinagar slum

The thematic and political concerns of Arshinagar thus suggest a move towards alienating the audience, particularly in the focus on the strange yet familiar neighborhood of the Arshinagar slum, rather than solely on the lives of the two wealthy protagonists. This eponymous slum is a neighborhood whose social, political, and religious life is saturated with mirrors. The teashop, a site for the latest gossip and news, has a large mirror on its back wall that reflects the rest of the set; the barber’s shop across from it has several mirrors that are angled to reflect the narrow alleys weaving through the cramped slum; broken shards of glass cover the walls in makeshift designs, larger mirrors on the walls are covered in graffiti, all serving to reinforce the crowded and constricting atmosphere of the Arshinagar slum.
The mirrors are aesthetically crucial in depicting the film’s climactic scene of violence, serving as a reminder of the distorted truths and the propagative and retributory nature of communal violence in contemporary India. For the residents of the Arshinagar slum, there is a predictability in their quotidian lives and a shared distaste for the wealthy Mitras and Khans, but at the slightest hint of religious turmoil, the differences between these neighbors are underscored. What is exposed here is the underside of community life, the convivial space of the para or neighborhood is flipped on its head, a situation described by a resident as “Janam bhar chini jader tara aaj anjaan” (“Those we’ve known all our lives have turned strangers overnight”).

The mirrors in Arshinagar reflect the carnage, multiplying and blurring the turbulence while also appearing to trap the victims who can see the reflections of their attackers approaching but have no escape. The neighbors—attackers and victims—thus blur into one as the self appears to literally be annihilated by its reflection in the mirror. Mirrors thus appear frequently through the

![Figure 13: Rioters confront their own reflections](image)
film and serve not just as a realization of the town’s name but rather as a repeated materialization of the themes of distortion, reflection, repetition, and misrecognition that undergird the narrative by marking the border between the material and the immaterial, what is tangible and what is imagined.

*Arshinagar* thus consistently plays with audience’s expectations, walking a fine line between proximity and remoteness, between familiarity and strangeness—between the self and the other in the mirror. It offers up mixtures, a blending of substance and shadow, of the quotidian and the fantastic, of reality and fiction, of the convivial and the distressing. Theatre bleeds into film and the image in the mirror acquires substance. There is a constant crossing of borders, a pushing of boundaries, in language, identity and form. This is what the film forwards as its core ideology in its use of Baul music and overtly determined cross dressing. This is what the film embodies in its modes of performance, questioning how we might define a film, its language, and its genre.

As several scholars have demonstrated, Hindi popular cinema, particularly from the 1950s onwards, “aimed to address the new Indian citizen” and was “often concerned with what is means to be ‘Indian’ in a way that exceeds the official definition of citizenship” (Dwyer *Bollywood’s India* 79, 37). Virdi asserts that the nation is a prominent trope in Hindi popular cinema and that the “concept of nation” determines the “moral universe” of these films (9). In other words, the moral dilemmas that underpin the narratives portrayed are often played out in terms of loyalty to and love for the nation. According to Virdi, Hindi popular cinema over the second half of the twentieth century provides a history of the nation’s culture, politics and ideologies:
[F]rom lauding the move from monarchy (read: colonialism) to democracy in the 1950s (*Aan*) to condemning regional separatism in the 1980s (*Karma*), and invoking tradition—that insignia of an imagined community—in representations of country versus city, east versus west, and the national versus the transnational, the nation in Hindi cinema is constantly rescued and reimagined (205).

She suggests, therefore, that Hindi film rarely strayed far from national concerns, whether it was in constructing or imagining national unity, displacing anxiety about national policy or progress, or in delineating the geographical and ideological borders of the nation. This tendency has not disappeared in the twenty-first century, despite the effects of globalization. Indianness, as a concept queried, imagined and defined by Hindi popular cinema has shifted from a “local citizenship” to a “global category” (*Dwyer Bollywood’s India* 64). Scholarly studies argue that Hindi popular cinema is an especially productive site for analysis, particularly in terms of the social, political, and historical concerns of national identity. Hindi popular cinema is not just a reflection of the conditions of society, it is also a site for an exploration and interrogation of these conditions or as Rachel Dwyer suggests, “the imagined worlds of mainstream Indian cinema. . . [are] the most reliable guide to understanding the nation’s dreams and hopes, fears and anxieties” (*Bollywood’s India* 7). Hindi popular cinema does not, therefore, always replicate reality, however, nor does it always function as escapist fantasy. While Hindi popular cinema has dominated the film industry in India, partly as a product of Hindu nationalism, an ideology that

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29 The encroachment of the film industry into government—several film stars, both regional and national have joined politics—and cricket—members of the film industry have investments in the Indian Premier League—demonstrates an overlap with the other two major public spheres of imagining and constructing the nation. It is reductive and simplistic to suggest that Hindi popular cinema merely represents or reflects the condition of Indian society. However, it is undeniable that it had, and continues to have, a role in shaping the modern Indian identity, and, in turn, is shaped by the concerns—social, political and cultural—that have gripped the contemporary Indian imagination.
elevates a North Indian, Hindu and Hindi-speaking identity as the norm, this does not necessarily imply that Hindi popular cinema is limited to replicating or promoting this ideology. Scholarly consensus, thus, has been that Indian popular cinema is intimately concerned with the nation and nationalism.\(^{30}\)

However, while prior adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* that are concerned with “what it means to be ‘Indian’” deal with the central category of the family whose homogeneity envelops and subsumes difference under a shared morality, *Arshinagar* uses the heterogeneous neighborhood as its analogue for a state in turmoil (Dwyer *Bollywood’s India* 37). The town is a microcosm of Indian society: unmistakably diverse, its fragile unity under threat from the competing demands of religious and political allegiance, balancing a commitment to tradition with the advancing forces of modernity and development, and controlled by the rich and powerful. Gendered and religious identities take on different valences in this context where both difference and equivalence are apparent, and by moving from the implied ultimate reconciliation inherent in the category of the family to the profound ambivalence at the core of neighborly relations, *Arshinagar* provides us with a more provocative and productive mode of depicting and understanding the nation.

This is perhaps most evident in the figure of Tayeb (Tybalt). Tayeb is Rono’s image in the mirror. Color-coded as his photo-negative, he resembles him not just in appearance but in his love for his cousin Julie. Though a permissible match for a conservative Muslim family, the volatile Tayeb is never presented as a viable marriage prospect, coded instead as a thug and

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outsider (Sen Interview). He embodies the figure of the neighbor—"that intimate other . . . with whom we can partially identify, but who displays a strange, potentially hostile desire—a death drive—that uncannily threatens the dream of community” (Edmondson 10). Tayeb is deployed to do the dirty work for the Khan family: delivering threats to families refusing to sell their land and taking care of matters outside the confines of the law. He is necessary, and perhaps even fundamental, to their success, but is at the same time their largest liability.

If Arshinagar is a film about the Indian nation, Tayeb represents the limit case of citizenship. In his first appearance in the film, he is incited to violence by Monty (Mercutio) who seems to know just which buttons to press. Tayeb scoffs at the Mitra gang: “Tau tora Mitter, amra holam Khan/ Bahadur Shah’r ujir amar dadu’r dadu’r dadu” (“Yet you are mere Mitras, while we are Khans sublime! / We are descendants of Bahadur Shah the Great”). Monty responds by taunting him:

Figure 14 Tayeb, Rono's intimate other
Ah! Now we’ve got it straight!

Not Shahrukh, nor Salman, and yet he is a Khan!

Your dad was a refugee, surname Akhtar!

Half-crazy bleary-eyed an Unani doctor.

How come you suddenly turned Khan?31

Though Tayeb calls himself Khan and is frequently put to work by them to intimidate uncooperative sections of the town, he is never quite considered a full member of the family. He cannot escape the fact that he is dependent on his maternal relatives and that his father was an Akhtar, a refugee, presumably from neighboring Bangladesh. Though he boasts that his mother’s family is descended from the retinue of Bahadur Shah, this claim to nobility does not hold much weight. His claims to the family and to the nation are through his mother and are therefore outweighed by his father’s outsider status. In one of the most disturbing scenes of the film, Tayeb coerces a reluctant landowner into signing over his property by threatening the safety of his daughter and holding a dagger to the throat of his wife. Tayeb’s characterization thus plays into the dominant social narrative where the Muslim man is a threat to the honor of the Hindu woman. Equally, his covert outsider status, imbricated in his matrilineal claims to citizenship, plays into the dominant filmic narrative that the Muslim can only be assimilated into the Indian nation/family in a subordinate role. Thus, Tayeb presents another productive site for the theorization of the neighbor. Though he is related to the Khans, his non-Indian lineage prevents his complete assimilation—both into the family and into the nation. He is the figure that both “rattles” and “ratifies” the legitimate citizenship of Arshinagar’s residents (Edmondson 10). The

31 “Khub bujchhi chandu/Na Shahrukh na Salman tobu ‘ami Khan’/ Tor baap chhilo refugee, podobi Akhtar/ Adh pagla chani se chokhe, Unani daktar/Tui ki bhabe hothat holi Khan?”
nation, in *Arshinagar*, is thus not merely a contained entity but rather one that both acknowledges and excludes its neighbors.

**Indian Popular Cinema and Neighboring Languages**

While *Arshinagar* is the first Bengali filmic adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, it draws, as has been demonstrated above, on a long history of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations in Hindi popular cinema. Largely because of its reach in a country where a significant percentage of the population are illiterate, Hindi popular cinema performs what Benedict Anderson described as the role of print-language in imagining a national community, providing an awareness of “fellow viewers” who are bound not necessarily by geography but by a shared set of prescribed values and beliefs. Partly as a product of this role, the language of Hindi popular cinema or “filmi dialogue” has become a form of national lingua franca that circulates outside of celluloid.

More than any other medium, including Anderson’s categories of the novel and the newspaper, cinema has “mediated the imagination of the Indian nation” both through its substantial reach within the country and abroad and “its consumption beyond the cinematic moment,” for example in the form of songs that circulate independent of the movies, on the radio, CDs and television (Dwyer *Filming the Gods* 1). According to Anderson, at the inception of European nation-states, print-languages “laid the basis for national consciousnesses in three distinct ways” (44). Firstly, they created “unified fields of exchange and communication” that allowed for groups of people previously unable to communicate to do so via a shared medium, making them aware of the number of people “in their particular language-field” (44). Secondly, print-language provided a “fixity” to language, slowing its rate of change (44). Lastly, it created “languages-of-power,” i.e. the dialects that were closer to the print-language survived and grew dominant (45).
The connections between Anderson’s description of print-languages and the context of contemporary India and film are not, at first glance, obvious. Particularly since Anderson directly contrasts the stability and “new fixity” of print-language with the diversity and variety present in speech (44). However, Hindi popular cinema has functioned very similarly in providing an awareness of “fellow-viewers” who are part of a national community bound by a shared set of prescribed values and beliefs. The language of Hindi popular cinema depends on the aural register but has also achieved a degree of stability which has ensured the continued survival, and dominance, of the dialects that remain closest to it. Thus, the analogue to early modern print-language in Europe in twentieth-century India is the language of popular cinema. “Filmi dialogue” has become a form of lingua franca that circulates outside of celluloid—in politics, literature, news and everyday interactions—that allows for variations in accent and dialect, but nonetheless maintains a fairly stable identity, never requiring absolute comprehension to entertain.

Bengali cinema, though its “organizational foundations” similarly derived from the Parsi theatre grew to define itself against the “brand of cheap entertainment” that formed the staple of Bollywood (Gooptu 15, 31). Sharmistha Gooptu has argued in her book, Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation that the regional film industry set itself apart from mainstream Hindi cinema by shaping itself around the idea of a cultured Bengaliness, the bhadralok sensibility, perhaps most prominent in the division set in place between the cultural and the commercial, the cinema of Satyajit Ray and the “stunt-filled adventure-romance genres” of Hindi popular cinema (31) . In doing so, it was able to create a domain which steadfastly resisted the “ideological construct[ion of India] as a Hindi-nation” (5-6). Thus, Bengali cinema, like other regional cinemas, is marked by its linguistic and corresponding geographical exclusivity.
While the industry shaped itself largely in opposition to “Bombay’s new commercialism,” it has in the last few decades become increasingly influenced by the dominant *masala* Bollywood films (Gooptu 5). It is the language that continues to separate contemporary Bengali popular cinema from its pan-Indian Hindi counterpart. Aparna Sen, *Arshinagar*’s director and one of the best-known female film directors in India, has been associated with the emergence of a “more middle cinema” that came about in the 1980s in the Bengali film industry “which addressed mainstream audiences and also sought to make certain political statements” (Gooptu 3). *Arshinagar*, marketed as a Bengali musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, both works as an example of the influence of Bollywood on regional cinema and functions to complicate this divide on a number of levels. Most significantly, *Arshinagar* dissolves the linguistic barrier between these two forms of cinema, its rhymed verse working to depict the interlingual and intralingual patterns of speech that pepper contemporary Indian metropolitan life. The *desification* of Shakespearean dialogue here involves the retention of literary verse form while simultaneously incorporating a mode of linguistic expression largely confined to the aural, popular, and informal.

*Arshinagar* works in part to reflect the influence of Hindi popular cinema, but it also troubles the established separation between these neighboring languages, both of which derive from Sanskrit. Though there is without a doubt a multigenerational feud in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, there does not appear to be any other inherent difference between the “two households both alike in dignity.” This is confirmed by Juliet when she declares that it is Romeo’s name, an external marker of identity, that is objectionable: “So Romeo would were he not Romeo called/ Retain that dear perfection which he owes/ Without that title” (2.1.87-89). This appears to largely hold true for the rest of the play, except for one instance in Act 1 Scene 4.
After first sighting Juliet, Romeo recites a paean to her beauty in ten rhyming couplets. Tybalt overhears this and immediately recognizes that it is a Montague who speaks: “This, by his voice, should be a Montague” (1.4.165-6). Though the play largely presents the Montagues and Capulets as inherently socially similar, there is a hint at a discernible distinction between the two families when Tybalt suggests he recognizes Romeo by the way he speaks. It is unclear whether Tybalt has recognized the masked Romeo’s voice or whether there is something in his speech or style of speaking that sets him apart, marking him by his speech patterns as a Montague.

What is barely hinted at in Romeo and Juliet is amplified to become the defining feature of the soundscape of Arshinagar. It is this shift in the process of adaptation, amplifying a minor suggestive detail to a central characteristic, that complicates the fidelity paradigm that dominates academic criticism of adaptations, where the putative original is an ideal that the adaptation aspires to reach. Every character has a unique style of speaking, making them easily identifiable by their voices. At the most basic level, Arshinagar’s soundscape distinguishes the Mitras from the Khans. As a cultured Muslim family, the Khan’s lexicon is peppered with words having Persian-Arabic roots. While some of these would be a standard part of the Muslim Bengali lexicon, others seem to be borrowed from Urdu. Some of these words, particularly those in the category of kinship, would be a standard part of the Muslim Bengali lexicon. Others, like izzat (honor), istamal (use), mumkin (possible), umar (age), instead of the analogous Sanskrit-origin words sambhram, byabahar, sambhab, boish, seem to be borrowed from Urdu.

32 “Oh she doth teach the torches to burn bright! […] For I ne’er saw true beauty until this night” (1.4.155-164).

33 For example, Daadi-jaan, Phuphi-jaan, Ammi.

34 In her book Two Traditions of the Bengali Language, Afia Dil conducted a comprehensive analysis of the differences between Hindu and Muslim dialects of Bengali, a distinction that is similar to that between Hindi and Urdu, but one that has not been crystallized into two separate scripts. She argues that, “[e]ven if
hand, the Mitras largely use standard colloquial Bengali, relying on words with Sanskrit etymology. Thus, the religious identity of each family is further underscored by distinct lexicons; we know by their “voices” whether they are Muslim or Hindu.

In his seminal work on code-mixing in India, linguistics scholar Braj Kachru has suggested the code-switching (switching from one code or language to another) and code-mixing (“transferring linguistic units from one code to another”) are “essentially used as communicative strategies with various motivations” (108, 111). He identifies three distinct types of code-mixing with respect to Hindi: Sanskritization, Persianization, and Englishization, with the former two associated with Hindu and Muslim identity respectively, and argues that one of the primary functions of these shifts and mixes of different codes is to “reveal or to conceal region, class and religion” (111). A similar study might be considered with respect to Bengali in Arshinagar, as the dialogue reflects these three types of code-mixing. The film draws on a broad lexicon: standard colloquial Bengali (with words deriving from both Sanskrit and Persian-Arabic origins), Hindi-Urdu and English. As demonstrated above, a Persianized Bengali points to a Muslim identity, while a Sanskritized Bengali points to a Hindu identity. While Kachru’s analysis describes the strategies and motivations of code-mixing in every day conversation, a scripted performance like Arshinagar renders visible these shifts and motivations. In other words, while code-mixing in quotidian life indicates degrees of intentionality and social conditioning, the scripted and artificial code-mixing of Arshinagar serves to reveal the ways in which our contemporary understanding of religious and regional identity is informed by speech patterns and lexical choices.

an individual Bengali does not profess to be either a devout Muslim or an orthodox Hindu, he is unmistakably marked as a Muslim or a Hindu by both his verbal and non-verbal behavior” (158).
Even within the Khan family, however, there are subtle distinctions. When Sabir Khan is convinced by his grandmother to come to the aid of Tayeb, whose hotheaded nature has landed him in jail, he says to his sister, “Ei shob tumi ki bolchho appa, tumie bhalo jaano, ragle pore na mumkin taar buke shamlano. Dimaag taar ektomi noi shoja. Daadi-jaan aapni she bojhan” (“What’re you saying Sister! You know well Tabbu’s hot temper is impossible to quell! I’ve tried to reason with him in vain! Grandma you explain!”). Sabir’s fluent Bengali borrows a few words from Urdu. His grandmother, Daadi-jaan, on the other hand, speaks Urdu with a few words of accented Bengali sprinkled in. Convincing him to come to the aid of his sister, she says, “Dekho Sabir, aurat-er kaun acche aar, baap, khasam noi bhai” (“Look Sabir, who else is there for a woman…but father, husband, or brother?”) The Khan family hails from the northern province of Awadh and in the speech patterns of the different generations we can trace their assimilation into the eastern state of Bengal.

In addition to Bengali and Hindi-Urdu, the film also incorporates a number of English words and phrases, resulting in a hybrid code referred to by the portmanteaux Benglish and Hinglish. These have generally been considered “a marker of modernization, socioeconomic position, and membership in an elite group” (Kachru 113). Francesca Orsini has more recently argued, however, that “Hinglish is projected as both the informal language of the globalized Indian middle class and the aspirational language of the upwardly-mobile, vernacular lower-middle, middle and working classes, who are ‘asking for more,’ but who clearly have very different linguistic repertoires and grasp of and within the two languages” (200). The latter instance is reflected in the interactions between the slum dwellers as they incorporate English words like “majority,” to indicate political dominance, into their daily interactions. In a private

35 For multilingual quotations, the use of bold italics points to Hindi-Urdu, the use of italics points to Bengali, and the use of roman script points to English.
conversation between Manik the teashop owner and his wife, who encourages him to consider the offer for his property to allow their son a better future, the words “offer,” “teacher,” “best,” “school” and “English-medium” are all in English. At the other end of the spectrum, we have Rono—in all likelihood a product of this English-medium schooling—whose speech is peppered with English phrases like “Baby just wait!”; “Fusion is in!” These are, however, paradoxically not emblematic of upward social mobility or superior education but are instead borrowed or absorbed from popular culture.

Thus, the use of English in this film is multifaceted: ranging from quotidian life to popular culture to legal and political registers, it is largely determined by who is speaking it. The use of English thus simultaneously reflects the global dominance of the language and the film’s imbrication in the local frictions of linguistic politics. In some instances, it is supplemental and part of the everyday, for instance the use of words like: drugs, message and mobile. In other cases, we have phrases that appear to draw on journalism and politics. For example, the use of English lends a stamp of authority in phrases like: the image of a political party, or, Hindus are the majority in India. Ultimately, the function of English is largely determined by who is speaking it, as, for the slum-dwellers it is an “aspirational language,” while for those belonging to the upper classes it serves a very different role (Orsini 200). It is precisely because English is utilized alongside other languages that these variations in the implications and associations are apparent.

At its most complex iteration, code-mixing in Arshinagar involves all three languages within a single interaction, like Reshma Bai’s introduction to the puppet show that forms the film’s framing device:

Accha aisi waisi kahaani na acche (No ordinary tale this!)
Eke bare bilayati qissa (A foreign one!)
Following what Reshma Bai is saying over here requires varying degrees of knowledge in all three languages, from certain words in English to the syntactical structures of Hindi-Urdu and Bengali. In its use of multiple languages, *Arshinagar* allows us to conceive of language relations as neighborly as well. While being cognizant of the diachronic relations between languages that belong to the same Indo-European family, the film also allows us to take a synchronic perspective, reflecting the ways in which these languages continue to border, push, influence, shape and neighbor each other in contemporary India.
The broad and diverse lexicon is balanced by the formal constraint of rhymed verse, with characters often completing each other’s line-rhymes. There is no strict meter, but both the film’s multilingual dialogue and the accompanying English subtitles rhyme, providing a certain pleasure in anticipating a rhyme that makes liberal use of the various combinations made possible by the film’s multiple languages. Characters often complete each other’s line-rhymes, a phenomenon most pronounced in the case of Rono and Julie, possibly a tip of the hat to the impromptu sonnet that forms Romeo and Juliet’s first words to each other. The speaking styles of Arshinagar’s characters are thus not merely marked by differences, but ultimately come together to form a complete and coherent semantic whole. The shifting, or rather hybrid, linguistic registers of the global, the national and the local mirror a similar shifting of place that is central to Arshinagar’s privileging of location. Thus, Arshinagar does not merely complicate what constitutes an Indian filmic adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, but more broadly what counts as a Bengali film.

The unusual use of language in this film has important implications for its classification as a Bengali film, as a fairly large chunk of the dialogue is not in Bengali. This does not, however, impact its audience reach. While no non-Bengali speaker will really be able to follow the film, for Bengali speakers the inclusion of Hindi-Urdu and English does not really prove an impediment to comprehension. On the one hand, this makes the case for the national dominance of Hindi-Urdu\(^\text{36}\) and the global dominance of English. More importantly, however, I argue that Arshinagar allows us to conceive of languages as live, shifting, and changeable, and of language boundaries as porous. In this desified version of Romeo and Juliet, we encounter adaptation not just in terms of medium, form, and content, but also in terms of an approach to what we mean by

\(^{36}\) This can, in part, be traced to the ubiquity of Hindi popular cinema.
language and translation. Translation, here, reflects the lived experience of contemporary India where codemixing, codeswitching, and multilingualism is the norm, frequently without any extensive fluency in more than one language.

**Conclusion**

*Arshinagar* is thus innovative not just in the manner in which it builds on and complicates the nation-as-family metaphor that is so prevalent in Indian popular cinema; it is also experimental in its use of language and its blending of film and theatre. The figure of the neighbor and the space of the neighborhood are most pronounced in *Arshinagar*’s thematic and narrative components but expanding this focus on the simultaneously proximate and different to the film’s form, language, and genre allows us to conceive of the boundaries between cinema and theatre, Bengali and Hindi, original and adaptation, Shakespeare and “global Shakespeare” as pliable, porous, and reflective. Ultimately, what the film offers us is not just an alternative iteration of *Romeo and Juliet*, but, in its rich experimentation, a novel approach to the genre of adaptation itself. Adaptation does not occur in a vacuum and it is a genre that lends itself to hybridity and pastiche. It is this shift from a monolingual text to a multilingual film refracted through the prisms of multiple approaches to the same story that epitomizes the neighborly relationship.

For the purposes of this project, the film’s shift from the paradigm of the family to that of the neighborhood in conceiving of the nation utilizes the condition of *desification* to make visible the contradictory and overlapping aspects of identity that inform a contemporary idea of what constitutes Indianness. Language, religion, and gender—all crystallized in external, and therefore fungible, markers of identity—demonstrate, via an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, the ways in which performance renders visible conceptions of contemporary Indian identity.
Chapter 2: “I feel a growing gap between my soul and body:”

Othello on the Margins on the Indian Stage and Screen

In early 2016, Natadha, a Howrah-based theatre group, staged Athhoi, their Bengali adaptation of Shakespeare’s Othello at the Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata. Since then, this production has remained fairly successful on the Bengali theatre circuit, returning every few months to packed houses. The eponymous protagonist, Athhoi (Othello), is a young Dalit doctor and still carries with him the traumatic memories of discrimination and oppression inflicted on his community. In an early scene with Diya (Desdemona), right before they get married, Athhoi recites a litany of crimes committed against Dalits in contemporary India, a speech that is roughly analogous to Othello’s long speech describing the story of his life, “the battles, sieges, fortune/ that [he had] passed” (1.3.130-1). Athhoi describes his grandmother being burnt to death on suspicion of being a witch, the hacking to pieces of Dalits in 2014, the honor killing of a Dalit in Uttar Pradesh, the torture and murder of a Dalit for having the temerity to love a Brahmin girl and the innumerable rapes of Dalit women. Each of these examples draw on true and fairly recent incidents and though journalistic in his telling, rise to a crescendo as one horrific crime follows another, providing only a small sliver of the lived experiences of Dalits in contemporary India. From the heinous magnitude of the crimes of torture and murder, Athhoi shifts to the rules that ensured a life on the margins: from not being allowed into temples to being prevented from touching the food of the upper castes. Athhoi ends this long and passionate speech with a
reference to Rohith Vemula, often the only name in the seemingly never-ending list that the audiences recognize and respond to.\footnote{All transcriptions and translations from \textit{Athhoi} are my own and are primarily based on a live performance at the Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata on 6th October 2017.}

On 17th January 2016, Rohith Vemula, a young Dalit graduate student at the University of Hyderabad, committed suicide. Following months of institutionally sanctioned caste-based discrimination, physical, emotional and mental trauma, Vemula’s suicide was only one amongst many recent revelations of the state of higher education in India where the free and democratic space of the university remains shackled to a casteist hierarchy. This suicide, or what was quickly termed institutional murder, galvanized India’s youth, sparking outrage across the country, setting off a series of student-led protests that riveted the media and occupied center stage in public discourse. At the center of this maelstrom was Rohith Vemula’s suicide note in which he articulated his despair: “I feel a growing gap between my soul and body.” This note became a rallying cry against systemic oppression and caste-based discrimination. Describing his “birth as [his] fatal accident,” Vemula illustrated the disjunction between individual worth and an imposed community identity, the negative extreme of a mobilization of caste identity:

> The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote, to a number, to a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.\footnote{Vemula’s suicide note was published in full by several news outlets following his death.}

Vemula’s evocative description of the manner in which votebank politics in contemporary India has reduced a human being from a multi-faceted person to a single marker of identity points to
the only mode by which caste has retained a presence in public discourse—treated as voting blocs and wooed by different political parties when the elections come around. Ironically, therefore, Rohith Vemula has posthumously been reduced to a singular identity: he has become the face of a larger national movement for Dalit rights and his life and words have been appropriated, used as a springboard by artists as instantly recognizable and a metonymic figure for the movement at large.

While critics and naysayers have posthumously questioned Vemula’s claims to a Dalit identity and his academic standing as a scholar, and while the government and university have sidestepped any responsibility for his death, what remains significant is the position he continues to occupy within the national imagination. Regardless of the relationship between this perceived identity and reality, i.e. whether this is rooted in indisputable fact is secondary, he has become the face of a larger movement. Vemula has been slotted into a narrative of the failures of a blind meritocracy where opportunities and institutional structures fail to adequately account for entrenched social prejudices and obstacles, ignoring in the process their own complicity in the maintenance of social hierarchies by hiding behind a professed faith in the strength of individual merit. Vemula is also slotted into the narrative of an overreaching man, a victim of the fissure between his own identity and that of the society surrounding him. Othello’s final speech-act similarly alludes to a fissured identity, where, as he stabs himself, he is both the defender of the Venetian state and its external threat: “a malignant and a turbaned Turk” (5.2.346). In asking those in his presence to “[s]peak of me as I am,” Othello’s last words chime with Vemula’s: a desire to be remembered as a flawed, imperfect, and unique person.

_ATHHOI_ draws on a number of different source materials, for example modeling Anagra’s (Iago’s) soliloquies on the character of the Joker from _The Dark Knight_ and drawing on several
Bollywood references and songs, but the core of the play remains concerned with the continued oppression and discrimination faced by Dalits today. Athhoi, an orphan and a beneficiary of the largesse of the village’s zamindar, a Kulin Brahmin and Anagra’s father, is a physician who has set up a clinic to tend to the people of the village of Bhinshura. While Shakespeare’s Othello is an outsider in Venice whose past and connection to a race, community, and society seem shrouded in mystery, Athhoi is, on the other hand, clearly and vocally rooted in his caste identity. Though he is alone, he carries with him memories of the backbreaking work that defined their lives and the violent prejudice that marked their deaths. Otherwise silent, reserved, and placid, referred to mockingly by Anagra as a “great man” or “mahan purush,” Athhoi releases his vocal and poetic side when talking of what he cannot forget.

Athhoi is thus an amalgam of Othello and Rohith Vemula, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s tragic hero through the filter of a contemporary Dalit activist. All unusually successful within their social contexts—a general, a scholar, and a doctor—all seemed to inevitably succumb to the schism between that success and the position that society deemed acceptable for them. **Athhoi** uses Shakespeare’s *Othello* as a means of narrativizing the contemporary Dalit experience, joining other iterations of *Othello* that seek to desify the racial black-white binary by incorporating alternative matrices of socially constructed difference. Significantly, **Athhoi** incorporates the political persona of Rohith Vemula as a filter, reading *Othello* through the lens of Vemula’s suicide and reading Vemula’s suicide through the lens of Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

Like **Athhoi**, some of the most recent iterations of *Othello* in contemporary India refigure the distinction between the protagonist and the society he lives in along the axis of caste. The earliest adaptations, in contrast, maintained the configuration of race, often, but not always,
equating Othello’s blackness with an Indian brownness. In the latter case this swung between a Eurocentric viewpoint that reinforced racial divisions in terms of essential identities and a more nationalistic viewpoint that saw Othello as representative of the colonized peoples whose violent actions seem an inevitable outcome of his oppressed existence. By using a comparative analysis of performance across different media of the same play, this chapter probes this shift from racial difference to caste-based difference, exploring both what makes this transposition particularly efficacious as well as the moments which indicate the ways in which these two categories resist equivalence. This chapter has two central and related objectives: first, to articulate the desification of Othello in Indian film and theatre within the intertwined frameworks of language, race, and caste; second, to explore the embodiment of the alien or the outsider in performance by focusing on these intertwined frameworks of constructing difference. I try to avoid a chronological narrative that suggests an uncomplicated and straightforward shift from the colonial category of race to the postcolonial category of caste, demonstrating instead the discursive overlaps and tensions between race, caste, region, gender, color, language, and nationality, categories that are historically contingent, fluid, and performative. This chapter, therefore, is insistently comparative. It analyzes three performances of Othello: the 2016 Bengali play Athhoi, the 2006 Hindi film Omkara, and the 1999 English play-turned-film Othello: A Play in Black and White against the backdrop of an Indian performance history of Othello, one that relies heavily on visual and verbal markers to construct difference.

The desification of Othello is shaped by the broad questions that have concerned scholars of Shakespeare for centuries and are fundamental to the literary and performance criticism of the play. What is Othello’s racial identity? While the First Folio refers to Othello as “the Moor of Venice,” in the early modern period, “the term ‘Moor’ could designate an African (north or south
of the Sahara), a Muslim, or even a South Asian Indian” (Cohen Norton Introduction 2073). How important is this identity to the plot and what role does his racial identity play in the portrayal of his gullibility and his propensity toward violent jealousy? The play incorporates several racial stereotypes—“African men’s extreme jealousy,” “African naiveté” and “the propensity of ‘uncivilized’ Africans to fetishize” to name a few (Cohen Norton Introduction 2074-2075). However, the choices made in performance can reinforce dominant racist perceptions of primitivism, savagery, and infantilism or reflect the impact of implicit and explicit structures of exclusion; can perpetuate racist stereotypes or emerge as a “[site] of negotiation where stereotypes are at once created and challenged, reinforced and exploded” (Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerrin 10). What are Iago’s motivations? Is this famously termed “motiveless malignity” a product of racist hatred? Is Iago an outlier in his racial prejudice or symptomatic of a broader social condition? How do we reconcile what is fundamentally a social taboo and societal fear of miscegenation with the position of authority that Othello clearly holds in Venetian society, is he an alien outsider, the “baseless Turk” whose conversion to Christianity prevents his complete assimilation or is his loyalty to this society and its hierarchical structures unquestionable? The relationship between the race of the actor playing Othello and that of the character has proven to be a heavily debated issue spanning concerns about equal opportunity casting, cultural appropriation and insensitivity, and the dangers of reinforcing damaging stereotypes. A tangential point in this conversation is whether Othello’s Africanness is an essential element in his characterization or whether it is his isolation, his marked difference from those surrounding him that is more significant.

The desification of Othello also responds to the specific concerns of performing Othello in the subcontinent, not just in terms of the choices and shifts made as a part of the process of
adaptation, but also in terms of the reception of this narrative. What resonances does the play, one that deals fundamentally with concerns of racial identity and the anxieties surrounding intermixing, have in a context that was informed and shaped by the very same structures of exclusion? In other words, we might consider the parallels between the Venetian court’s dependence on Othello’s military prowess alongside a societal denigration of an interracial marriage and the hypocrisy of the British Empire which sent Indian soldiers to fight for them in battle while denying them legal and social equality within their own country. Did colonial and early post-colonial Indian audiences see in Othello a reflection of their own position? Moving forward to contemporary postcolonial approaches to the play—how might Othello be transformed to speak to a context where racial difference as understood within a Euro-centric framework barely exists but where racist structures of oppression and exclusion run rampant? In other words, what resonances and affordances might this narrative provide in a context where race is ostensibly absent but where color-consciousness—fair skin being explicitly valorized and coveted—and social hierarchies are rigidly omnipresent?

I use these questions as the foundation for this chapter in focusing on the representation of the alien or the outsider and in examining how this might speak to, reflect, and interrogate contemporary political concerns and anxieties in today’s India. In the 170 years since the controversial production of Othello that first included an Indian in the cast, Othello has been a popular text for adaptation in India, and representations of the titular character have varied, ranging from a brown Hindu (in relation to a white, British Desdemona) to a lower caste or Dalit

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39 In other words, I will be looking primarily at the character of Othello as he is perceived and represented in relation to Iago, Desdemona, and society in general. Lois Potter in her performance history of Othello, remarks the play can be performed differently as Othello’s play, Iago’s play, and Desdemona’s play, naming each of her chapters accordingly. In this chapter, I primarily focus on reading the productions as “Othello’s play[s].”
(in relation to an upper-caste or savarna Desdemona). While the Shakespeare play remains popular in performance, both in English and in translation, this chapter is particularly invested in adaptations that desify the context, as these productions in their representations of difference, dramatize the contours of legitimacy in the Indian nation. These approaches to the outsider who seeks to assimilate have included difference along the axis of language, region, nationality, caste, and race, questioning who belongs within the parameters of the community and the nation, how these parameters are defined, and the impact of an enforced assimilation.

While the chronology of productions gives the impression of a smooth, regular, and linear development, the selective genealogy also marks the presence of multiple strands of Shakespeare performance in contemporary India where Elizabethan doublets and blackface sit alongside the gritty reality of rural Uttar Pradesh, and the continued relevance of issues animating the earliest of these productions remains unacknowledged. I do not read these productions as being singularly and exclusively representative of a particular approach or interpretation but rather as reflecting in their similarities and differences, convergences and divergences, the centrality of the issues animating the desification of Othello and the importance of the context of a longer performance history.

“Rude am I in my speech”: Othello as Language

In one of the few comparative essays on the “genealogy of Othello performance/production in India,” Nandi Bhatia makes the case for changing spectatorial responses being a product of the “shifting politics of the moment” arguing that the extant material on the reception of these performance “suggest that audience responses were and

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40 For instance, Alyque Padamsee’s highly publicized 1991 Othello starring Kabir Bedi had the actor performing in blackface.
continue to be segmented along racial, social, economic, linguistic, class, and caste lines, and demonstrate that the relationship of spectators to Shakespeare has been extremely complex and constructed” (156-7). I want to build on this argument, looking instead at the productions themselves, inevitably inflected by spectatorial responses to suggest that the way they incorporate language and linguistic difference (ranging from diction to fluency to accent to dialect to distinct languages) reflect the shifting politics of language in contemporary India. This is a genealogy that can only be understood as building on and drawing from prior moments in the performance history of Othello. In other words, while each of these productions incorporate linguistic difference, a core trope of the play Othello, in a manner that reflects the linguistic politics of the moment, the shifts in the representation of these linguistic politics derive from a longer history and are not merely insulated products of a particular moment; not solely a synchronic representation of linguistic politics but rather a diachronic one as well.

Roysten Abel’s critically acclaimed multilingual 1999 play Othello: A Play in Black and White, later adapted into a film In Othello (2003),\(^1\) starts off with familiar core concerns: What is authentic Shakespeare? And who is uniquely qualified to direct and perform it? The premise of this winner of the 1999 Edinburgh Fringe First Award is a theatre troupe in Delhi rehearsing and performing Othello and, in the process, providing a pointed commentary on postcolonial and intercultural theatre conventions on the one hand and the persistent racist and linguist prejudices in today’s India on the other. The cast want an Englishman to direct the play instead of the

\(^{1}\) While Abel’s film In Othello shares a similar core plot with Othello: A Play in Black and White, there are also several marked differences; it is not simply a filmed version of the play but is instead very much a product of its medium. There are also some changes in the narrative and the character, most significantly in the substitution of Daniella (the Italian director in the play) for the real director Roysten Abel. The analysis in this chapter primarily focuses on the United Players’ Guild (UPG) theatrical production but notes relevant changes in the filmic version in the footnotes. I draw all quotations from the play from a 2000 recording of a performance at Kamani Auditorium, Delhi, as part of the Bharat Rang Mahotsav festival.
Indian Roysten Abel but eventually end up with an Italian lady, Daniella, an acceptable level of authenticity and Western authority because *Othello* begins in Venice. Barry John, the experienced English actor expects that he will get the part of Othello by virtue of his background and experience and is already preparing by covering his face in boot polish. The Italian director, however, settles on Adil Hussain, the stagehand from the northeastern state of Assam who assists with the cast’s Kathakali training and helps them block stage action. Young and uncomfortable in English, Adil is an outsider and a baffling choice for the rest of the cast. While Daniella is an accepted, even desired outsider, Adil is in many ways even more foreign to urban Indian theatre.

The tension between Othello’s alien position and the exclusively English ownership of Shakespeare is a live issue in *desified versions of Othello*. One of the earliest recorded performances of *Othello* in India was the 1848 production at the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta, advertised as featuring “the character of the Moor of Venice being undertaken by a Native Gentleman . . . the first of the sort ever attempted” (Mitra 198). Less than two decades after Ira Aldridge assumed the title role of *Othello* in London’s Covent Garden, Baishnab Charan Adhya, the “Native Gentleman” became the first Indian in recorded history to take on the role in Calcutta, then still the capital of British India. The attention that this “first attempt of a native-born subject of British India to embody any character of the British Drama” attracted in the contemporary press—primarily *The Englishman, The Bengal Hurkaru, The Calcutta Star*, all English language newspapers published in Calcutta—is the only extant material we have about this production and its novel star. The production was reviewed more extensively than any other contemporaneous performance, the circumstances surrounding the performance receiving at times, more attention than the play itself. As a product of these extensive reviews, the 1848 *Othello* has attained the position of a pioneering event in the field of Shakespeare in India, a
moment at which what Poonam Trivedi has termed the “two mutually exclusive streams” of Shakespeare reception in India—“an ‘academic’ literary Shakespeare” that evolved from the classroom and “a popular Shakespeare on stage, transformed and transmuted in translation”—intersected in the body of Baishnab Charan Adhya, a young student, playing Othello on the British Indian stage (India’s Shakespeare 15).

A century and a half later, Othello: A Play in Black and White dramatizes some of the issues that are central to the reviewers of the 1848 Othello. They were primarily interested in investigating whether it was possible for a “Native Gentleman” to successfully take on the role of Othello, one that, according to them was unquestionably meant to ideally be performed by an Englishman. Though the central focus of the reviews of the 1848 Othello is the performance of Adhya, they do not, at first glance, appear to address issues that we, as twenty-first century scholars, would consider central to such a pioneering event. Though he is referred to as the “real unpainted Nigger” there is no evaluation of whether in being “unpainted” he somehow approaches a more “authentic” portrayal of the Moor (Mitra 154). The announcements in the newspapers preceding the performance expressed the misgivings of the reviewers, focusing on Adhya’s physical capacity and his linguistic ability, his body and his speech. The editorial of The Bengal Hurkaru stated:

We may be mistaken and we shall be glad indeed to find we are so, but we very much doubt whether all other qualifications apart, any one of our fellow citizens able to play

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42 A series of reviews of this production were collected and published as part of a chapter in Amal Mitra’s Kalakātāya bideśi raṅgālaya, later translated and published as English Stage in India. These drew on archival newspaper records and on personal collections of newspapers. I was able to verify most of the reviews by using the British Library archive of colonial newspapers, but I cite Mitra’s book because it is easier to acquire and access.
the Moor without paint and likely to make the attempt, possesses enough of physical energy to carry him successfully through that most arduous character (Mitra 153).

The conviction that the anonymous gentleman would be unable, physically and linguistically, to take on the character was then confirmed in reviews of the performance. One reviewer pointed out that Adhya succeeded only in “having committed the words of the character to memory but naught else” (Mitra 205), while more sympathetic reviewers identified the same gap in his education, couched in more encouraging turns of phrase:

Experience will do much, for, deprived of good models as the student has hitherto been, we are bound to make every allowance, and to look with favourable eyes upon this dramatic offshoot of the native body (Mitra 160).

Adhya’s figure was described as “inelegant, his manner undignified, his gait awkward and ungainly”; he was “a person in voice, person, gait, and manners [most] unfit to realize the conception … of what Othello should be” (Mitra 205, 163). One reviewer characterized his performance as “tame, languid, affected, tedious and imperfect and a cruel infliction, undeservedly imposed upon a kind hearted and indulgent public” while the more sympathetic Bengal Hurkaru reviewer suggested he was suffering “from a general charge of tameness” (Mitra 162, 159). The anonymous reviewer, “Fretful” on the other hand bemoaned that the “superb speech to the Senate was delivered as tamely as if given by a snivelling urchin at a grammar school” (Mitra 163). These preconceptions and reactions of nineteenth-century colonial reviewers, writing about and for a British expatriate population, are mirrored in Abel’s 1995 play. In Othello: A Play in Black and White, the other cast members, belonging to the elite English-speaking metropolitan theatre circuit, react with similar shock at the unusual casting of Adil Hussain in the titular role.
In her article on Abel’s play, Shormishtha Panja argues that “the production is the site of intersection and ultimately, of conflict between […] residual colonial attitudes and predilections in a postcolonial society and […] the forces of social change” (109). She maps this conflict between colonial and postcolonial attitudes onto the relationship between the play-within-a-play and its accompanying frame. The focus on complexion and color while not emphasized except in the title of Abel’s *Othello: A Play in Black and White*, certainly provided a springboard for the play’s conceptualization which tried in Abel’s words to demonstrate that Indians “are more white than the whites” in their entrenched prejudices (quoted in Trikha). Both Abel and Hussain spoke in interviews of the discrimination they had faced in the theatre circuits not just because of their poor Hindi, but also because of their dark complexions which ensured they rarely received leading roles.\(^{43}\) While it is language and the regional accent that are highlighted in the play, the choices made in terms of casting are equally deliberate in trying to expose a color bias both within Indian society more generally and the theatre circuit more specifically.\(^{44}\) However, the separation between the language of Adil/Othello and that of the others in the acting troupe is more complex than a simple mainstream-marginal, colonizer-colonized binary. While it is true that the prejudices and beliefs present amongst the members of the troupe are inflected by a lingering colonial bias about how Shakespeare and the corresponding larger field of urban

\(^{43}\) While not prominent in the theatrical version, the film *In Othello* underscores this shared blackness between Roysten and Adil. At the same time, in their differing levels of comfort and popularity in the urban theatre milieu the film shows that skin color is only one of the factors at play in determining one’s social status.

\(^{44}\) This prejudice is perhaps nowhere more prominently displayed than in matrimonial advertisements in Indian newspapers where complexion—fair, wheatish, and dusky—is one of the primary characteristics along with height, caste, and profession that are offered to prospective partners. A cursory examination of these profiles reveals the dominance or rather the value placed on fair skin in comparison to the almost complete absence of the adjective “dark” and any of its synonyms.
Anglophone theatre should be performed, to suggest that the two ideological sites in conflict are colonial and postcolonial ignores the impact of globalization and the increasing popularity of intercultural and international theatre.

The play is framed by its use of Kathakali, a classical Indian dance form that requires years of training and relies on heavily codified movements and expressions. *Othello: A Play in Black and White* begins with a series of stylized movements that make up their Kathakali warm-up exercise. In its concluding scene, the last speeches of Adil/Othello and Lushin/Desdemona are accompanied by a series of intricate hand gestures from the same performance vocabulary. The introductory warm up exercise is interrupted by a question from one of the members of the troupe: “Why the fuck do we have to do this play in Kathakali anyway?” the response: “Because we have an Italian director who wants to take the play to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.” However, the Kathakali present in this performance is a far cry from the traditional performance style—minus its elaborate markers and costumes, it’s a stripped back version that is incomprehensible to its audience. Panja suggests that “[r]ather than return to the play’s continental roots, [the director] makes it exotic and strange not just to a western audience but to the westernized, English-speaking cast of the UPG” (108). This turn to Kathakali on the part of the Italian director is strikingly similar to research undertaken by nineteenth century orientalists who sought to find in classical Sanskrit literature an original and unsullied culture which they could then disseminate amongst the native populace. It is also reflective of the worst of intercultural theatre that incorporates a foreign (read non-Western) performance style for the

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45 There have been a number of intercultural theatre productions which have experimented with fusing Kathakali and Shakespeare. This includes the Kathakali *Othello* first adapted by Sadanam Balakrishnan in 1996 and produced by the International Centre for Kathakali in New Delhi. Performed several times since, this production utilizes an extremely pared down version of Shakespeare’s plot and joins other “foreign” plots co-opted to revitalize Kathakali.
sake of novelty alone. Abel pointed out in an interview that “some people said that directors were using Indian folk forms to give an exotic appeal to their plays and get invited abroad” and, their tongue-in-cheek utilization of this trend both critiques this tendency in contemporary Indian theatre and subscribes to the same standards (quoted in Nath “Rehearsal”). The turn to this traditional and physical performance style—rooted in specific and often minute bodily movements—and its corresponding association with the Othello/Adil/outsider character runs the risk of reinforcing problematic binaries of body–mind and primitivism–intellectualism.

Keval Arora, a Delhi theatre critic, described this adaptation as focusing on “amplifying the cast’s and the audience’s automatic denigration of everything that is unusual or departs from the standard cultural practices associated with Shakespeare” (“Speaking” 101). Othello: A Play in Black and White moves between “two very different planes of reality” where the first is that of an urban Indian theatre troupe and the second is that of Shakespearean drama. Its formal experimentation, similarly, has two central and intertwined impetuses—it deliberately moves away from “the accepted notions about the way Shakespeare should be played” and it provides a mirror to “regionalist and linguistic prejudices” that run rampant in contemporary Indian society (Basu J.; Arora “Speaking” 101). The experimentation inherent in the former provides a conduit through which to reveal the socio-political concerns of the latter. Abel speaks of his days at the National School of Drama and his subsequent experiences in the theatre circuit as a springboard for the depiction of the linguistic politics in the play: “The casting at NSD is dominated by Hindi speaking students, and if you were a Malayalee like me or from the North-East [like Adil] and couldn’t speak [the] language, your direction would be ridiculed” (quoted in Chander). In Keval Arora’s assessment, Abel “paints the play’s tension in terms of polarities between the Assamese versus the Delhi-ite, the metropolis versus the small town, and English versus Hindi and the
vernacular” (“Directing”). However, the play though described as being “in black and white” constructs and represents these binaries only to tear them down, questions their underlying assumptions, complicates their neat divisions and demonstrates how they bleed into each other.

Impressed by Adil’s Kathakali performance, Italian director Daniella wants him to try for the part of Othello. He demurs because he “can’t handle the English.” She, in turn, tells him to perform in whatever language he wishes to, and while she tries to summarize the plot and characters for him in English, he tells her he already knows the entire text in translation, in Assamese, revealing at the outset the narrow assumptions undergirding who has (or can have) access to Shakespeare. The scene is then set for Act 1 Scene 2, where Othello performs some of his most evocative and eloquent speeches in front of the Venetian Senate. Adil, moving between Assamese and Hindi46 recites the speech relating the courtship of Desdemona—“She loved me for the dangers I had passed, /And I loved her that she did pity them” (1.1.167-8)—relying heavily on a connection between the rhythms of the language and his bodily movements. Possibly like the Italian director auditioning him, reviewers saw Adil’s “use of language and body [as] subvert[ing] the English-speaking actor’s hold on Othello and creat[ing] a wonderfully real experience of Othello” (Driver). The emphasis on physical theatre, on stretching limbs, kneeling, using every part of his body to emote stands in stark contrast with the more staid and contained performance styles of the rest of the cast and it is immediately apparent that Adil has got the part, providing an “authentic” interpretation of the Moor, and confirming in the process stereotypes of corporeal and carnal versus the spiritual and the intellectual.

46 Adil slips between Assamese and Hindi, the latter functioning as a lingua franca as the other characters presumably cannot speak or understand Assamese. Equally, however, the sprinkling of Assamese relative to Hindi is probably indicative of the play’s intended audience—an urban Hindi-speaking Delhi one.
Though Adil acquires the part as a product of his performance in Assamese, the final production is still to be in English and Lushin, the experienced, sophisticated and English-speaking actress who plays Desdemona, is assigned to help Adil with his lines. It is during these tutoring sessions that the two develop a bond that goes beyond that between co-performers, though Adil is clearly more enamored of her while she continues an informal relationship with Dilip/Cassio who belongs to the same metropolitan English-speaking theatre circle. Adil’s performance of Othello never returns to the virtuosic intensity of his audition scene just as Othello’s lyrically expressive language never quite returns to the eloquence of the same scene. As Adil is increasingly pushed to perform in English, he stumbles, and the dynamics of the frame and the play-within-a-play are inverted where, as director Daniella puts it, “he cannot be a convincing Othello onstage but is starting to behave like the real Othello offstage” in his jealous possessiveness of Lushin.

Most scholarly introductions to Othello emphasize its theatrical success, describing the helpless fascination with which spectators are compelled to watch the drama unfold. Cohen points out that this popularity is “perhaps, paradoxically, because […] it is excruciating to watch” (Norton Introduction 2073). What has uniquely and consistently stood out when it comes to Othello’s performance history is the “blurring of boundaries between life and art” and “its powerful effect on audiences” (Potter 1). There are numerous anecdotes of the last scene in particular as galvanizing audience members into intervening to stop the murder from taking place, and this association, or absence of a division, between actor and character applies not just to naïve and easily beguiled audiences but also to the actors who took on the role. Thus, Potter states, “the history of playing Othello is the history of a desire for a degree of identification
between hero and role that might almost seem to rule out the need to act at all” (1). This blurring of “the frontiers between illusion and ‘reality’” has also bled into adaptations of the play where Othello is frequently staged within a frame narrative where the dynamics between the “real” characters mirror or question those present in the inset performance, as is the case with both Saptapadi and Othello: A Play in Black and White (Potter 1). Like the broader global performance history of Othello, the Indian performance history of the play reveals an intimate concern with the question of representation, performativity, and difference: Can the Moor/the Other/the subaltern represent himself? How is blackness or otherness performed? How do we recognize and interpel blackness or otherness onstage?

In Ajoy Kar’s 1961 Bengali romance film Saptapadi (The Seven Steps of Marriage) Act 5 Scene 2 from Othello is featured as part of an inset theatrical performance. Produced in newly independent India, Saptapadi tracks the development of an interracial relationship in early twentieth-century British India. Rina Brown and Krishnendu Mukherjee, both medical students, have an intensely antagonistic relationship, one in which a repressed physical attraction is expressed in terms of them hurling racist and religious insults at each other. It is a college production of “Selections from Othello” which Krishnendu participates in as a last-minute substitute for an English gentleman, that marks the turning point in their relationship. Though an extremely short sequence in the film, the moments leading up to, as well as the performance of Act 5 Scene 2, foreshadow the fate of their socially transgressive relationship, explicitly drawing a connection between the Hindu-born agnostic Krishnendu, the Christian Anglo-Indian Rina and the characters they are portraying onstage. Though set in a period several decades after the

Ironically, this is true of a performance history where Othello has only relatively recently been a role customarily undertaken by a black man, performed prior to that by a white man in blackface.
Adhya production, at a historical moment at which British power in India was waning, this short sequence of the murder scene in *Othello* has some interesting parallels with its 1848 precursor.

For *Saptapadi*, the 1848 *Othello* and its attendant controversy haunts the film. What was unthinkable and unspeakable in the 1848 *Othello* becomes a possibility that is brought up and worked through in these later productions, though still to ultimately doomed consequences. The film flips the traditional association of character with actor, where Othello’s jealous tendencies bleed into the actor’s consciousness resulting in “Othellos becoming so involved in their roles that they killed their Desdemonas in earnest” (Potter 1). Instead, the inset performance of the murder scene, ghosted as it is by racial anxiety surrounding miscegenation and questions of authenticity, ownership, and universality, functions to both probe and foreshadow the ultimate tragic conclusion of the protagonists’ relationship.

Despite the fact that in other scenes of the film, Krishnendu (Uttam Kumar) and Rina (Suchitra Sen) speak the Shakespearean dialogue in rehearsal, in the scene of the actual performance, two Shakespearean theatre actors—Utpal Dutt and Jennifer Kendall—speak the characters’ lines in voiceover. It is almost impossible to discern Krishnendu/Uttam Kumar under both blackface and the “proper” British accented Shakespeare of Utpal Dutt. The two sites of critique of Adhya’s presumably “unpainted” performance of Othello—his body and his speech—are, in the case of Krishnendu displaced onto other actors: the blackfaced imitation of Orson Welles and the diction of Utpal Dutt. The reviews of the 1848 *Othello* reinforce this sense of authorial authenticity and its relationship to race. The reviews focused on simultaneously criticizing and complimenting Adhya’s command over the English language. As the “whitey

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48 An extremely well-known Bengali Shakespearean actor who trained with Geoffrey Kendall as part of the traveling troupe Shakespeareana that was the subject of the 1965 film *Shakespeare Wallah*. He played the role of the maharaja in that film. See the Introduction for a more detailed reading.
brown specimen of Young Bengal” (Mitra 163), the student community well versed in the literary study and declamation of Shakespeare, Adhya’s “pronunciation of English was for a native remarkably good” (Mitra 158). In other words, while his command over English was perceived as impressive for an Indian, the impossibility of his achieving native fluency was continually reinforced. Over a century later, therefore, Saptapadi demonstrates that there is still resistance to having Bengali-accented Shakespeare in a theatrical performance; the standards of quality remain unquestioningly Anglo-American and Anglophone. This division between an ideal anglicized version of Shakespeare and the native performer who constantly strives towards that goal but never achieves it carries over into Kar’s film. Uttam Kumar’s Bengali-accented Shakespeare is starkly contrasted with that of the Englishman whose part he takes over and with Utpal Dutt’s Received Standard Pronunciation that functions as his voiceover in the murder scene.

The purpose of the inset performance of Othello in Othello: A Play in Black and White therefore builds on its use in earlier iterations of the same play-within-a-play/film model, but equally shifts away from and questions some of the core assumptions underlying its earlier use. In other words, the play-within-a-play model looks very familiar at first sight. It mirrors the relationship between the “real-life” characters and provides an outlet for working out some of the tensions that lie latent in the dynamics of the frame plot. But in UPG’s production, this is not unidirectional. Saptapadi and Shakespeare Wallah use the scene from Othello as lens through which to analyze the unfolding drama, as a mirror that sharpens and echoes the tropes that are present in the framing narrative, and as an aid to clarify and complicate our reading of the film’s central relationship. The relationship between Othello and Othello: A Play in Black and White shares many of these characteristics, but in this scenario, the process of rehearsing Othello and
the clear parallels it brings up with the dynamics of the acting troupe come to bear on the Shakespearean text as well. In other words, we can utilize the dynamics and characterization of the framing play to tell us more about Shakespeare’s *Othello* and about the theatre and performance associated with Shakespeare more broadly in today’s India. One of the significant ways in which *Othello: A Play in Black and White* sets itself apart from other iterations of the play-within-a-play model is in the centrality of language to its characterization of Othello as “the proverbial outsider: the fringe person who is kept out from the mainstream due to caste, region, religion or colour and needs desperately to belong” (Kazmi).

In the very last scene of the play as Adil and Lushin perform Act 5 Scene 2 as Othello and Desdemona we see that the education has been moving in both directions—while Lushin has been teaching Adil English, he has been teaching her Kathakali. The Kathakali curtain is brought on, revealing a seated Desdemona/Lushin at stage left and Othello/Adil at stage right moving towards her on an otherwise stark and empty stage. She remains frozen as he recites the “It is the cause” speech interwoven with Kathakali gestures and movements. She only stirs at her line “Who’s there?” incorporating Kathakali movements into her performance as well. He throttles her as she sits, her folded arms between their bodies. He then kneels, placing his hand and head on her lap. Dilip enters and places his hands on both their heads; the play ends. The framing device of the play is therefore never closed, we never return to Adil, Lushin and the other members of the acting troupe, Barry/Iago never quite reveals his machinations nor is he condemned by the rest. As a result, we remain in a state of uncertainty regarding the play’s ending—has Othello killed Desdemona or has Adil killed Lushin? In a horrifying hyperreal actualization of the tendency to equate the character of Othello with the actor playing him, the play leaves us hanging. Is the transformation complete? Has Adil fully embodied the violently
jealous Moor? And, importantly for its objective of revealing socio-political realities of contemporary India, it compels us to ask where we might locate the border between Adil and the Moor?

Several of the reviews of *Othello: A Play in Black and White* describe Othello as being in Assamese or in Kathakali, both of which are codified modes of communication with a grammar and syntax of their own. They remark on the unusual and experimental nature of these choices that diverge so sharply from the accepted standard of performing Shakespeare in the theatrical milieu of contemporary urban Delhi. What they tend to leave out of their consideration, however, is the fact that the play dramatizes a process of cultural assimilation, that the end-goal of the rehearsal process is an *Othello* that looks and, importantly, sounds strikingly like the Shakespeare we’re used to with just enough Kathakali thrown in that it appears exotic to the untrained eye. The entire play, *Othello: A Play in Black and White* devised and performed in rehearsal is set up as a “site of negotiation” that at once reflects and interrogates trends in theatre, what counts as accepted and experimental and how we can simultaneously dismantle and strengthen prevailing stereotypes about who has the ability (and can have the opportunity) to perform Shakespeare (Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerrin 10). This is not to say that language is the only marker of differentiation in the play, the production deals with the more complex and intertwined vectors of race, region, and class. However, Adil’s descent into insanity has as its clearest marker the imposed shift in his language from Assamese to English—“the more he rises in his environment the more confused he gets and the deeper he suffers. When things come to a head, his mind explodes. And it’s his native feelings, emotions and actions that overpower him. He pulls his hair, writhes on the ground, howls like an animal, every bit a man at his primordial level” (Shankar L.).
The multiple forms of language present in the Shakespearean play construct and separate the three focal characters—Othello, Iago, and Desdemona—and our perceptions of this differentiation are mediated by racial, gendered, and social markers of identity that function both to bolster and confirm stereotypes. Scholarly criticism that focuses on Shakespeare’s play in terms of the language and its relationship to the characterization of its protagonist tend to follow two tracks. One angle traces Othello’s linguistic collapse from the composed, metaphor-heavy and syntactically coherent Othello of the first act who wooed Desdemona by relating the story of his life to the Othello of Act IV who “plunges right on through prose to a series of incoherent cries and babblings at the edges of the sublinguistic” (Calderwood 297). This loss of eloquence is read as the often-conflated products of Iago’s machinations and the revelation of a core primal and violent man. In this reading, Othello’s true nature is revealed (Iago’s manipulations may or may not be the catalyst here) and the trappings of civilization (read Venetian/Western) fall away, reinforcing in the process the racist stereotype of an inalienable association between barbarism, primitivism, and ignorance. The second angle is a comparative one, which reads Othello’s poetry alongside the speech patterns of other characters, most notably Iago. They are seen as “[occupying] different places in the linguistic hierarchy,” underscoring the genre-specific origins of these character types and their speech patterns in a play that works at the intersection of several different dramatic genres (Potter 4). The association of Othello with the verse form of high tragedy ensures that if this play is to be read as the tragedy of Othello, it cannot only be seen in terms of him succumbing to the “green-eyed monster” but also in terms of his loss of language. Othello’s tragedy manifests itself not in the transgression of societal norms but rather in the disintegration of his power over speech. At the beginning of the play his poetic and
persuasive powers rival or equal his military prowess: his narration of his life’s story won him Desdemona’s heart.

However, while the most poetic, eloquent, and evocative language belongs to Othello, the bulk of the play’s language is Iago’s—he delivers some of the most memorable lines and phrases, he has the long soliloquies to the audience and most importantly it is through language, through his manipulation of the slippage between what seems and what is, that he manages to convince Othello of his wife’s infidelity. After Iago goes to work on him, through the power of speech, of inference, of “seemingness,” of imagination, Othello loses control of his language and can no longer string a sentence together:

Lie with her? Lie on her? We say ‘lie on her’ when they belie her. Lie with her? That’s fulsome! Handkerchief! Confessions! Handkerchief! To confess and be hanged for his labour. First to be hanged and then to confess. I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shake me thus—pish! Noses, ears, and lips! Is’t possible? Handkerchief? Oh, devil!

[He] falls in a trance. (4.1.33-40)

This loss of speech is accompanied by physical debilitation—differently translated in performance as a Caesar-like epileptic fit or a faint—that appears to fully demonstrate the power that Iago has over Othello’s mind and body. Equally, however, Iago’s style of speaking, particularly the negations that pepper his speech seem to infect the way in which Othello speaks. Othello only really re-acquires the same rhetorical fluency that marked his first scene at the very end of the play, his suicide speech is reminiscent of the telling and re-telling of his life’s story that characterized his courtship of Desdemona. Othello’s descent into the pre-linguistic “body of sounds” (Calderwood 297) can thus be read as a peeling back of the veneer of civilization and
sophistication, a corroboration of his inherent barbaric nature that relies on a racist essentialism. His loss of poetry may also, however, be read as a product of Iago’s infectious malice, placing the origin of evil in an external agent rather than as part of Othello’s essential nature, a reading that is substantiated by Othello’s return to his eloquent self as he puts a “bloody period” to his life (5.2.349).

The underlying assumption in both these readings is the connection between Othello’s authentic self and his language, or lack thereof. Is his authentic self the man whose “speech verges on writing” or one whose language is a disconnected series of words and sounds “devoid of sense” (Calderwood 294, 297)? Related to this centrality of language to Othello’s characterization is a global performance history that is inescapably racially inflected. Played for centuries by a white man in blackface, Othello was “(w)ritten by a white playwright for a white actor, [and] his language is marked, in the play’s linguistic context, by its difference” (Hodgdon 34). The shift in Othello being played (now almost exclusively) by a non-white man adds a layer to the long critical discourse of evaluating “an actor’s speaking performance” in terms of “how far he (or she) falls short of an imaginary Shakespearean ideal” (Hodgdon 34). Therefore, while having a black man play Othello might produce a more “authentic” performance, criticism that uses an accepted and idealistic style of Shakespeare as its barometer reinforces hierarchies of ownership inherent in colonial structures. Thus, “black Othellos’ ‘rude speech’ positions them as imperfect slaves who perform a disservice to Shakespeare’s canonical word” (Hodgdon 35).

In her article “Race-ing Othello, Re-Engendering White-Out” Barbara Hodgdon focuses on two productions of Othello where the black actors playing Othello are already linguistically othered: John Kani in Suzman’s 1987 production whose mother tongue is Xhosa and Willard White in Trevor Nunn’s 1989 production whose performance training was in opera, read as a
different linguistic code. These casting choices can be seen as subscribing to a reading in which Othello is speaking in an “acquired language” rather than a native one where “his speaking can accentuate his otherness” (Honigmann 28). In this reading Othello’s eloquent speeches that appear to verge on writing are “almost too self-consciously measured . . . another instance of cultural assimilation gone wrong” (Honigmann 28). All of these interpretations focus on intralingual variations, distinctions between style, rhythm, genre, accent, and varying degrees of fluency. Abel’s Othello: A Play in Black and White goes one step further in incorporating multiple languages—English, Hindi, Italian and Assamese—and dramatizing the process and effects of language acquisition.

In the 1848 Othello, critics were concerned about an authentic performance of the character of Othello by a man who could not claim to have an innate and intuitive relationship with the English language, ensuring his performance would always fall short of their standards. In Saptapadi, English is similarly valorized and idealized, and while Krishnendu and Rina appear to have complete fluency in the language, and in the case of Rina, ease in the manners, etiquette, and customs that accompany it, the film shows that the gap between nature and environment can never be absolutely breached, the latter always wins out. By this point Indians appear to have internalized the standards preached by the reviewers of the 1848 Othello, striving for but never quite completely achieving them. This English is placed in contrast to a nativist and nationalist valorization of the vernacular, at the moment of Independence—presented not as the superior choice but rather as the indisputable one. In Othello: A Play in Black and White, we have a valorization of English but in a postcolonial context where the language is not so much related to the colonizers but rather reflective of a global and international dominance—though placing this within the trajectory of performances of Othello reveals that these categories are not
mutually exclusive but rather historically feed into each other. In this multilingual play, we get a
glimpse of linguistic politics both at the national and international level, both as reflective of the
contemporary moment and as a product of colonial history. In *Othello: A Play in Black and
White* every character is morally ambiguous and while Othello/Adil’s access to English is clearly
fraught, the play problematizes this linguistic difference further by demonstrating that access to
the language does not automatically guarantee success and that those who possess knowledge of
English are not inherently or culturally superior to those who do not, while simultaneously
depicting the ease of movement, material comforts, and social acceptance that accompany
fluency.

“*Nature erring from itself*: Othello as Race, Caste, and Color

Set amidst the caste-ridden politics of small-town Uttar Pradesh, the heartland of North
India, Vishal Bhardwaj’s 2006 Hindi film *Omkara* is representative of a specific local context,
using both the dialect of the region as well as location shoots to emphasize the movie’s
embodiment of a local identity. Bhardwaj, hailing from this region himself, refers to it as the
“wild west” of India where the law of the land is appropriated and manipulated by violent
political groups. Like Bhardwaj’s previous film *Maqbool* (based on *Macbeth*), *Omkara* contains
elements of a gangster film and the expanded role of the Duke into Bhaisaab, a local politician
aspiring to national heights and his group of often violent political enforcers headed by half-caste
Omkara, the *bahubali* (strongman), place the characters in a morally ambiguous area. Viewing
Omkara as a ruthless killer, “the greatest warrior of all” as the title song claims, is very different
from our perception of Othello as a general of the Venetian forces not just because, in the
Shakespeare play, we never really witness his military prowess. In the film, we are given “ocular
proof” of the degree to which violence imbues their everyday life and this results in a distancing
effect for the audience, making the violent ending not entirely unexpected (3.3.357).

Shakespeare’s play is both modernized and desified: eavesdropping is replaced by the modern tools of spying—cell phones and cameras, the tiny and loaded signifier of the handkerchief is replaced by an elaborately bejeweled waistband, and in deference to audience expectations “item-numbers” occupy the space of Elizabethan drinking songs. Through its marketing as a Shakespeare adaptation, riding on the critical success of Maqbool, the attraction of the star cast of the movie, and most importantly the expansion of global audiences for Indian film, the movie is undoubtedly an example of a global Shakespeare adaptation—bringing the wilds of Uttar Pradesh to the international screen—possessing both the resources and access to circuits of travel and dominating popular and critical discourse on Othello in India.

In Athhoi and Omkara the separation between performance and reality that is the subject of exploration in Othello: A Play in Black and White dissolves and the characters of Omkara and Athhoi—both marginalized in contemporary Indian society—occupy an analogous position to Adil. In these cases, however, the inset performance of Othello is no longer required as a lens to clarify or interrogate what is going on in the frame narrative. Similarly, the distinct languages and ways of speaking, of performing a particular identity so prominent in Othello: A Play in Black and White and Saptapadi appear to collapse into homogenous translation—Shakespeare in Hindi or Shakespeare in Bengali. A focus on this shift, however, makes us inattentive to the subtler distinctions between speech patterns of different characters that are central to the Shakespeare play and retained and manipulated in adaptation.

Language in Omkara plays a very different role to that of previously discussed productions. While the characters speak mostly in an often coarse and heavily accented dialect of Hindi, there are significant moments in the film where English is brought in as a counterpoint.
Dolly addresses her love letter to Omkara in English (even though the letter itself is largely in Hindi), Dolly learns to play and sing the Stevie Wonder song “I Just Called to Say I Love You” to romance Omkara, and Kesu (Cassio) frequently intersperses his dialogue with English phrases. Nicknamed Kesu Firangi (foreigner), likely because of his relative fluency in English, Kesu is both mocked\(^49\) and revered by the others for this difference. On the one hand his knowledge of English sets him apart from the other political enforcers and he is seen less often in a violent role. The association with a college education is viewed as emasculating—he is popular among the ladies, a Casanova, but not one who can be considered at the same level as the other goons. This is perhaps what makes it surprising that he is chosen to succeed Omkara as bahubali.

The chronology of events is rearranged in the film and we literally see Omkara passing over Langda (Iago) for Kesu in an elaborate and religiously tinged ritual, a move that shocks everyone. But it is, correspondingly, this very knowledge and fluency in a foreign tongue that acquires him this promotion—his popularity amongst college students guarantees the political party a strong showing amongst the youth. Omkara justifies his choice saying: “The entire college youth is in Kesu’s grip. If the strongman is educated and gentlemanly the elections will be a landslide victory for us.”\(^50\)

Significantly, the English language and the college experience are the two things that Dolly and Kesu share—and, for both of them, English is a language associated with courtship—adding a layer of plausibility to their relationship, at least in Omkara’s eyes. Langda uses this to his advantage, suggesting that Dolly and Kesu had a clandestine relationship dating back to their

\(^{49}\) In a heated argument, Kesu is yelled at: *Saale firangi teri toh* (Shut up you English fuck!) (published script 13)

\(^{50}\) *Pure janpath ke college ke larke Kesu ki mutthi mein band hain...bahubali shikshit aur sabhyat ho toh chunav bhi ektara hoga* (published script 41).
time in college. In Omkara, thus, we get an ineluctable marriage between the inescapable dominance of global English and the intensely local dialect of Uttar Pradesh—a far cry from what Bhardwaj refers to as the “filmy language” of contemporary Indian cinema, “in which people don’t talk as they do in reality but as they should in the reality of that artificial film world” (Omkara v).

The choice to specifically make Omkara an adha bahman (half-Brahmin) rather than a Dalit is one that Bhardwaj has justified by saying that this marginality allows Omkara to be powerful amongst the upper-castes, contributing to his sense of inadequacy and insecurity. For Bhardwaj, slotting him into a solely lower-caste identity would not have provided the social mobility for his position to be realistic (Interview). Omkara is thus a half-caste, born of an upper-caste father and a lower-caste mother and when Vakil Sahib (Brabantio) rails at him for

Figure 16 Kesu teaching Dolly "I Just Called to Say I Love You"
abducting Dolly (Desdemona) he points to this as emblematic of his inferior character: “I had forgotten that you are a half-caste after all, borne by that bloody slave girl…no? Fuckin’ bastard…”52 While Omkara’s identity as a half-caste Brahmin is clearly common knowledge it isn’t mentioned half as often as Othello’s Moorish identity is, and, in fact, is only really emphasized by Vakil Sahib and Rajju (Roderigo), as objections to him marrying Dolly, an objection that joins others, most prominently that of his profession—a political enforcer and a thug.53 No other markers separate Omkara from the rest of his community, he participates in religious rituals as a Brahmin and commits acts of ruthless violence with compunction, like the other political enforcers. If there is a member of this community of enforcers who stands out, it is Kesu Firangi, his outsider status embedded in his nickname.

In contrast, Omkara’s characterization seems far removed from what we have come to expect from Othello. Most importantly, he lacks Othello’s command over language, we rarely see him express himself with anything near Othello’s eloquence, and from the flashback montage that shows us his courtship of Dolly (Desdemona) it is made clear that she falls in love with him “for the dangers [he] had passed” and not as a consequence of his narration of them (1.3.154). Omkara is, by contrast, a strong and silent Othello, a forbidding and serious presence whose descent into jealous insanity seems almost a foregone conclusion, and is not one that is traced in

51 While the published screenplay uses the word jamadarni that might translate to “slave girl,” the film uses the word kanjari that carries connotations of prostitution.

52 Bhul gaya ke tu bamman to hain par adha…adha khun to tere badan mein us jamadarni/kanjari ka bhi hain…harami saale (published script 15).

53 Omkara brings up his half-caste status in a private conversation with Dolly as they lie together on the swing bed. He does not reveal an insecurity or a hatred for this identity instead emphasizing that his birth was a result of love. She, on the other hand, seeks to comfort him by saying even a crescent moon is called a moon.
the loss of his command over language. Once again, it is the Othello character’s lack of fluency in English, coded as a thug-like illiteracy—that is one of the markers of his unsuitability for Dolly/Desdemona—as Vakil Sahib asks Bhaisab (the Duke): “You think she would’ve eloped with this gangster⁵⁴ on her own?⁵⁵ (21). The presumption of a weakened or inferior status, by virtue of descent, echoes some of the vocabulary surrounding the 1848 performance of Othello: just as Omkara is patently unsuited for Dolly, Adhya is patently unsuited for the performance of Shakespeare.

The vocabulary of the reviews gesture towards a physical incapacity that is at odds with the vital and virile characterization of Othello, a role that, according to the review printed in The Englishman, requires the “highest histrionic talent” (Mitra 162). This vocabulary also echoes predominant stereotypes regarding the Bengali man, most famously delineated by Macaulay in his essay on Clive which describes a persona more suited to Falstaff than Othello:

Whatever the Bengalee does he does languidly. His favourite pursuits are sedentary. He shrinks from bodily exertion; and, though voluble in dispute and singularly pertinacious in the war of chicane, he seldom engages in a personal conflict, and scarcely ever enlists as a soldier. There never, perhaps, existed a people so thoroughly fitted by nature and by habit for a foreign yoke (32).

Macaulay also refers to “the physical organization of the Bengalee” as being feeble even to effeminacy and this particular charge of effeminacy became associated, towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, with a subset of the Bengali community—the babus (quoted in Sinha

⁵⁴ While the subtitles translate daravne jahil gunde to “gangster,” a more literal translation might be “horrifying uneducated/ignorant goon.”

⁵⁵ Aapko lagta hain ki voh Omi jaise daravne jahil gunde ke saath apni marzi se gaye hogi?
15). Mrinalini Sinha in her book *Colonial Masculinity* focuses on the development and relationship between the categories of the “manly Englishman” and the “effeminate babu” describing the “quintessential referent for [the] odious category” of the latter as being the educated middle-class and upper-caste Bengali Hindus, the community to which Adhya belonged (2). Though Sinha’s analysis focuses primarily on the latter half of the century and I remain cognizant of the dangers of a retrospective reading, the association of the Bengali (and more specifically the Bengali babu) with physical weakness and effeminacy had been present in the cultural imaginary for a number of years before it coalesced into the stereotype that forms the subject of Sinha’s analysis. The vocabulary of the articles that both anticipate and judge his performance provide evidence that, for the reviewers, Adhya’s performance is informed by a racial stereotype.

The reviews made clear that Adhya’s performance did not meet the expected standards. These included the knowledge of and ability to deliver in, English, and extended also to physical comportment onstage—the energy, forms of movement, and presence required not just of Othello but for performing Shakespeare more generally. One reviewer complained that, for a large part of the murder scene, Adhya committed the cardinal sin of turning his back to the audience:

In the beautiful soliloquy “It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul” the actor was scarcely audible, and the vile knack of turning his back upon the audience told greatly to his disadvantage (Mitra 159).

Fifteen lines into this soliloquy Othello kisses a sleeping Desdemona. We might hypothesize that this level of physical interaction between Mrs Anderson, the English actress
playing Desdemona, and Adhya would have been unthinkable, an issue that was solved by Adhya turning his back on the audience at this moment. Another annoyed reviewer stated:

[W]hen the Moor stabbed himself he entirely forgot that he should have attempted to stagger over to the bed on which his victim lay, instead of which he tumbled down with the emphasis of a drunken man (Mitra 163).

In their article on this production, Chatterjee and Singh talk of the tendency towards “ethnic correctness” (70) of representation in the colonial theatre and the simultaneous “affirmation and…elision of racial difference as categorized through taxonomies and typographies” (72). This simultaneous preoccupation with minute racial distinctions—a marker of the systematizing colonial ethnographic state—and the tendency to collapse racial otherness into a single category runs through the responses to the 1848 Othello and their evaluation of Adhya’s performance. In both physical attributes and linguistic capacity, he failed to achieve the accepted norm. As a brown Bengali Hindu he did not possess the necessary physical characteristics of the Moor and as a native Indian he did not have sufficient mastery over the English language. As neither Moor nor Englishman he failed to embody both characteristics essential to the performance of Othello.

Debates surrounding miscegenation in colonial India escalated in the period following the 1857 Revolt but it was evidently a concern for James Barry and his actors a decade before. However, what is significant is that the reviewers make no mention of this—the presence or absence of the dying kisses—but focus instead on the manner in which this performance did not adhere to the preconceived notions of how the scene was meant to be played. In their article on this production, Chatterjee and Singh suggest that the absence of references to “the enactment of potential miscegenation on the stage” was because it was a topic that though present in public
debate in England, “perhaps was unspeakable and taboo in the colonial setting” (78). I argue that these reviews are not silent on the topic of race, but rather that they call attention to race in a different way.

In Saptapadi, on the other hand, there is an insistent emphasis on racial and, perhaps more importantly religious, difference. Through the first part of the narrative Rina refers to Krishnendu (literally dark moon) as “blackie” and “heathen” and their religious differences are brought to the forefront when later they decide to marry, and he is compelled to convert to Christianity. In her extended analysis of the film, Paromita Chakravarti identifies Krishnendu as emblematic of a “very confident, strident and modern Indian identity…who refuses to allow matters of race, nationality, or religion to interfere with his choice of a partner” (“Othello” 47). He is “aggressively and proudly Indian, dressed in dhoti-kurta, defending his nation and race against every calumny. Mischievous, humorous, able and charming, he is a perfect foil to the stiff-upper-lipped strait-laced Englishman” (Chakravarti, “Othello” 48). When Rina calls him blackie or darkie he responds by saying he is proud to be so: “Don’t you dare call me Blackie, don’t you know we Blackies are Goddess Kali’s children?”56 While he registers her derogatory term for his complexion as an insult, he makes it clear that he sees the color of his skin as a marker of divinity not inferiority. However, despite these verbal references and other evocations of their religious and ethnic differences through the depictions of their families and their clothing—there is no visible visual racial difference between the two. In other words, it is only because Rina calls him darkie that we understand he is of a darker complexion and different ethnicity. The fact that we later discover that Rina is the product of an interracial and

56 Khobordar Blackie Blackie bolben na kintu. Blackie holo Ma Kalir shontan (my transcription and translation).
correspondingly sexually violent relationship between her English father and his Indian maid, adds another layer to the lack of apparent distinction between Krishnendu and Rina.

Central to the film’s evocation of the racial dynamics of *Othello* is the inset theatrical performance of Act 5 Scene 2 as part of the college production. Once Rina finds out that the object of her affections, the original actor for Othello, has backed out and that Krishnendu has taken over the role, she places a condition on her continued participation in the performance: he must not touch her. This injunction is repeated several times and despite the absurdity of the request (since they are to perform the murder scene), Krishnendu acquiesces. Krishnendu, in blackface complete with a beard and large gold earrings, moves in a manner reminiscent of Orson Welles. The scene does not depict the proscenium stage and is instead portrayed as if it is a seamless part of the movie and not a filmed theatrical production, borrowing heavily from the aesthetics and camera angles of Welles’ 1952 *Othello*. He does not touch her for the first half of the scene, the camera very deliberately shows us that he only pretends to kiss her. However, at
the moment of the murder, he deliberately places his hands around her neck and the change in
their relationship can be pinpointed to this very second. It is a moment that is evoked later in the
film, when Rina touches her neck and the camera cuts to Krishnendu staring at his hands. In that
moment of physical interaction, they have crossed a line that permits them to acknowledge their
mutual attraction.

If, as Chakravarti argues, Krishnendu taking on the role of Othello, originally meant for
John Clayton, an Englishman, means that “he simultaneously slips into two roles—those of
Clayton and of Othello” the fact that this moment when he is Clayton-Othello is also the only
moment when he is actually dark undercuts any simplistic reading we may have of the racial
politics at play in this film (“Othello” 48). Using blackface seems paradoxically to reinforce
one’s whiteness or non-blackness and Krishnendu can only avail of this when he is taking on a
role meant for an Englishman. In other words, in applying blackface he becomes white—“it is
less about identifying himself with an alienated black consciousness and more about
participating in the exclusive, privileged, and charmed circle of white people through
appropriating a role that was meant for Clayton” (Chakravarti “Othello” 48). It is also ironic,
therefore that this moment when he most clearly visually embodies a black man, the Other, and
when he comes closest to a white Englishman—is also the moment when Rina acknowledges her
attraction towards him.

What sets Othello apart from Krishnendu is not just the markers of performative
identity—body and speech—but the medium to which they are bound and its relationship to
verisimilitude. Othello in theatre is markedly different from Othello in film and the remediation
of theatre in film, in Saptapadi, Shakespeare Wallah and later in In Othello, the film adaptation
of Othello: A Play in Black and White, underscore the artificiality of the former with respect to
the latter. With a play-within-a-film the processes and modes of stagecraft are emphasized to a degree that separates the performance space of the stage from the real world and characters are reduced to an assemblage of forms of movement and types of speech. In the case of film, on the other hand, every attempt is made to maintain the suspension of disbelief and erase the processes by which the character, plot, and world are constructed. Thus, while Othello is clearly a character onstage—with all the insubstantiality and artificiality that implies—his filmic counterpart Krishnendu is real.

The dynamic of interaction onstage between different races—marked both visually and verbally—takes a dramatic turn when we look instead at the interaction between castes in a social hierarchy in which every interaction is heavily codified. Historians have argued that a Western and colonial elucidation of race is embedded in a contemporary understanding of caste despite knowledge of a lack of social, biological, and historical equivalence between these two categories. The colonial ethnographic project utilized theories of race and the methods of anthropometry to forward a claim that “caste was really a way of dealing with race” instituting a “historical parallel between Aryan and British colonization” (Dirks 210). While this equivalence did not last, it is undeniable that the modern phenomenon of caste is inflected by a colonial attitude to race, particularly in the move to organize, systematize, and standardize what was a far more complex, diverse, and contradictory social system. Equally, contemporary political parallels particularly in terms of the lived experiences of Dalits in India and African Americans in the United States and the complex lattice of laws and policies intended to “protect them from the most egregiously anti-democratic and anti-capitalist forms of inequity” (Tartakov 117) have underscored this apparent equivalency. However, the staged and filmed depictions of these lives reveal the heterogeneity of their performative overlaps. In the following section, I utilize the
performance history of *desified* Othellos to explore the ways in which caste is performed and the ways in which it is visually and verbally represented.\(^5^7\)

The one aspect that *Omkara* repeatedly emphasizes, however, in marking Omkara’s caste status as different is his complexion. Indu (Emilia) brings to the fore imagery of black and white when she teasingly describes the Omkara-Dolly pairing:

*Just like milk in a pot of coal,*

*More like candy in a crow’s mouth,*

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\(^{57}\) Another Indian adaptation of *Othello* that draws on caste as its axis of difference is Jayaraaj Nair’s Malayalam film *Kaliyattam* (1997). Perumalayan/Othello is a *theyyam* dancer, a ritual form of worship in Kerala where the performers belong to the lower castes. Lower-caste *theyyam* dancers, after they are made up and possessed by the spirit of the god(s), can in a carnivalesque role reversal, bless the higher castes. Thus, a lower-caste dancer is, for the period of his performance, socially elevated. *Kaliyattam* explores the dynamics of a *theyyam* dance troupe and the social transgression of Perumayalan’s marriage to upper-caste Thamara.
Like the moon in the lap of the darkest night
Like a magic flute on the lips of the dark lord Krishna.\textsuperscript{58}

This series of similes that build on each other, repeatedly emphasize the contrast in Omkara and Dolly’s appearances but shift in the process from a connotation of pollution to divinity—the coal makes the milk poisonous, the crow captures and consumes the sweet candy, a tempting morsel, the night envelops and eclipses the moon, the lord Krishna manipulates the flute. In the first simile, the coal poisons the milk rendering it toxic, this emphasizes the incongruity of their relationship and the potential that his darkness—both literal and metaphorical—might rub off on her. The second simile, like barfi (the pale marzipan-like candy) in a crow’s beak carries implications of theft and once again the incongruity of the pairing—the crow associated with scavenging and garbage, the barfi associated with festivity and celebration. The third simile both emphasizes and undermines the incongruity of the pairing—the appearance of the moon on a new moon night is both unexpected and plausible and speaks to the potential for renewal and new beginnings. The negative connotations of harm, pollution and theft are absent in this third simile that rests instead on a fundamental and natural pairing of black and white, dark and light. The fourth simile, however, takes this one step further, moving from a natural pairing to a divine one, comparing their pairing not to the one between Krishna and his consort Radha, but rather to the one between Krishna and his famed flute which was used to attract the attentions of the gopis (milkmaids). His influence in this instance is not negative but is nonetheless dominant. Like the looted barfi, the flute has no agency of its own and it is at the mercy of its player (the association with the mythology of Krishna who is painted as a seducer

\textsuperscript{58} Bilkul jaise koyle ke lote mein doodh/ Jaise ke kavve ki choch mein barfi/ Jaise amavas ki gond mein chandrama/ Jaise kare kanhaiya ke hothon pe basuri (published script 44-46).
and abductor of women cannot be ignored). What the last simile does is flip the association with darkness and, like Krishnendu in *Saptapadi* who connects his dark skin to the dark-skinned goddess of night, Kali, Omkara here is associated with dark-skinned god Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu. Darkness in this context is divine but mortal standards of beauty still prioritize fairness. Thus, the good-bad, light-dark binary attains a layer of complexity that complicates the apparently inherent hierarchy that is assumed in a Western framework. Importantly, these similes reflect the dominant dynamic of the film, which reduces Dolly/Desdemona’s agency and voice, making her very much into the object to be possessed and stolen.

While the narrative of *Omkara* displaces the distinction between Omkara and Dolly from race to caste, the aesthetics and language of the film paradoxically tend to actually prioritize a visually emphatic difference in complexion. A purposeful choice for Bhardwaj, who intentionally cast a dark-complexioned actor as Omkara as discrimination on the basis of color “exists in our country” and is “[embedded] in our language and education too” (Interview). The costuming choices serve to reinforce this unusual pairing. Omkara is frequently wrapped in a black shawl with a red border associated with tribals and stereotypically, therefore, with dacoits and thugs. Dolly, on the other hand, is often seen in white or light pastel colors that underscore her naivete and innocence. In the last scene of the film the camera remains for an extended period of time on the bodies of the couple in their wedding finery, Omkara on the floor while Dolly is on the flower-embellished swing bed above him as it creaks with every small movement, slowly coming to a standstill. Her lifeless hand reaches out over him and the focus of the camera further emphasizes the difference in their complexions. While caste is clearly chosen as the axis through which we are meant to understand Omkara’s marginal position, his insecurity, and his propensity towards violence, what is repeatedly emphasized in the film’s
language and aesthetics is the degree to which one of these maps onto or is equivalent to the other—in other words, is Omkara dark-complexioned because he is half-caste?

The answer lies in the discursive nature of caste identity in contemporary India. As is the case with caste and race, there is little evidence to support an existing physical equivalence between skin color and caste, but the association of darker skin with pollution and lighter skin with purity makes “colour within caste […] more of an ideological construction than a physical problem” (Guru 171). Omkara thus does not deal with the intricacies of caste politics and divisions in the specific region. Instead, it displaces this more convoluted and elaborate system of social differentiation that is caste onto the starker and more easily demonstrable distinction of skin color.
“Teach him how to tell my story”: Othello as Performance

*Athhoin*, set in the Bengali village of Bhinshura, similarly reworks the central antagonistic relationship between Othello and Iago along the axis of caste. Described by theatre critic Ananda Lal as one of “the tiny minority who actually bring something new to the table” in adapting Shakespeare, this play, produced and first performed in early 2016, joined a global deluge of Shakespeare to mark the quatercentenary of his death (“Ways”). Within the field of Global Shakespeare, on the other hand, *Athhoin* occupies a vexed position. While it is provocative in terms of the possibilities it opens up for the intersection of global discourses of race, caste, and theatre, it speaks to a relatively circumscribed audience, playing almost exclusively at the same space in Kolkata and traveling only very occasionally to other parts of eastern India and Bangladesh.

*Athhoin* (Othello) is a young Dalit doctor and still carries with him the traumatic memories of discrimination and oppression inflicted on his community. Anagra (Iago), a Kulin Brahmin, is the son of Athhoin’s benefactor and harbors an irrational hatred towards Athhoin, his boyhood companion, for surpassing him in academics and in his father’s affections, despite belonging to a lower caste. This adaptation draws on a series of contemporary socio-political references, incorporates Bollywood song-and-dance sequences, builds in a series of stylized dances to aid in scene changes and relies heavily on Heath Ledger’s portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* as a point of reference for its interpretation of Iago. An intense and emotionally charged pastiche of different performance styles, it has received reviews both praising its timely and topical approach to casteism and critiquing and questioning the choices made in the process of adapting a Shakespeare play. In placing this example in conversation with previous adaptations of *Othello*, I
argue that *Athhoi*’s desified performance of difference moves away from appearance and speech to center instead on socio-political discourse.

*Athhoi*, thus, does not utilize any overt verbal or visual signifiers to mark a distinction between Athhoi and the other characters who ostensibly belong to different and higher castes. He speaks the same language, has the same complexion, and no attention is drawn to any physical characteristics that might set him apart from the others.\(^{59}\) The injunction against touch, so central to the purity-pollution axis of the caste system, is prominent in the earlier iterations of the play, but markedly absent in *Athhoi*, except in Anagra’s barely masked revulsion. In this sense, *Athhoi* shifts away from the body/speech construction of difference to the political where he is reduced “to his immediate identity” (Vemula), an identity into which he is interpellated by his descent. In *Athhoi*, the crux of racial distinction shifts from the forbidden interracial pairing of Othello and Desdemona to the impossibility of intercaste brotherhood between Othello and Iago. In *Athhoi*, Diya does belong to a higher caste, but it is a distinction that, while mentioned, is swiftly overcome and Anagra’s preoccupation rests primarily on the social gap between himself and Athhoi. Unlike *Omkara*, where caste is vaguely referenced, *Athhoi* names the castes, marking the complex nature of the relationships evident to those versed in the sociological history of this region and a more opaque binary to a wider audience. The caste distinction lies in nomenclature not appearance. We read Kulin Brahmins and Lodhas at opposite ends of a variegated and hierarchical spectrum of caste but, without any further details, that flattens the diversity of interactions and interdictions between these and other castes and sub-castes.

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\(^{59}\) It would be interesting to consider remediation through the opposite path in *Athhoi*, where The Joker, a character conceived, created, and consolidated through the paired media of comic books and superhero films, is brought into the realm of live and embodied performance onstage.
While language is a distinctive marker of Othello’s marginality in the prior *desified* versions of *Othello*, in *Athhoi* it is not Athhoi’s lack of fluency in English but Anagra’s command over the language that marks its presence in the play. It is frequently in English soliloquies that the foreign-educated Anagra reveals his machinations to the audience. Athhoi is characterized as reserved, shy, muted, soft-spoken and from the very outset is sitting quietly while others squabble around him. His oratorical power is only unleashed in the feverish speeches describing centuries of discrimination. These explosive speeches, like the one described at the beginning of this chapter, are undeniably some of Athhoi’s most compelling moments onstage in contrast to the more theatrical and charismatic Anagra. They also, ironically, provide a foreshadowing of his eventual breakdown—a complete surrender to violence and the loss of speech—in a fight with Radho (Roderigo) he is transformed into a violent and brutish man, and a knife in his mouth replaces any semblance of speech.

Thus, *Athhoi*’s articulation of social difference relies almost exclusively on the label of caste. Caste is a single word that has been used to stand for a number of complex, different, overlapping, diverse and often intensely local systems of social classification that exist both within and beyond religion. A social hierarchy in which every interaction is heavily codified, your caste, i.e. what you are born into, can determine and define who you marry, where you live, who you eat with, and what work you do. In contemporary India, however, the lower-castes have become synonymous with two sets of terms: the self-adopted name of Dalit which means crushed or broken, and that encompasses a condition—the lived experience of marginalization and the three series of classifications in policy that provide them with governmental aid: Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes (SCs, STs, and OBCs). Over the past few decades there has been a concerted effort on the part of Dalit activists to incorporate
“caste into a larger narrative about racial oppression” (Reddy 544), in other words to consider caste within the international legal human rights framework that seeks to define and dismantle systemic oppression and discrimination. By placing casteism under the rubric of an internationally accepted rights definitions of racism, this effort sought to “dislodge it from this exceptional status” (Loomba “Caste” 223) and “to see caste as a fragment of race—not conceptually, not analytically, not even empirically but legally” (Visvanathan 2512). These arguments reached a watershed moment at the 2001 Durban Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. They were opposed by both the Government of India and a group of scholars who saw caste as “an internal affair” and as inherently different from race, using the complex and infinite variety of caste as an argument in favor of its distinction from race (Visvanathan 2512). Those arguing in favor of casteism and racism as comparable systems of oppression focused on the definition provided by the United Nations that placed an emphasis on discrimination and intolerance on the grounds of descent among other categories. In other words, they argued that casteism and racism both operated similarly “on the body, by naturalizing anatomy and fetishizing blood/descent” (Natrajan and Greenough 23).

The intersections and analogous relationship between the categories of race and caste have had a long and complex history and to suggest that one category neatly maps onto the other flattens the nuances of their distinctions. Those opposing the Dalit petition at WCAR focused on these distinctions and ignored in the process the central thrust of the Dalit position, which was not to forward an indisputable equivalence between caste and race but rather to suggest structural similarities between casteism and racism. In his article leading up to the conference, S. Visvanathan summarized the arguments put forward as follows:
The final argument is thus threefold. There is the lived experience of Dalits who see a racism in caste. There is the folk theory of skin and blood which is racial in framework. There is also the politics which feels race might be the liberatory framework for rescuing the impasse of caste as oppression (2514).

These arguments, though unsuccessful at the Durban Conference, highlighted on an international stage the issue of caste-violence and the political and legal overlaps between race and caste. Considered a turning point by contemporary scholarship on caste, this moment led to a call to “theorize caste in radically new ways” within the context of a rapidly globalizing world. The introduction to Against Stigma, a collection of essays produced as a response to/representation of the “Durban-turn” in caste scholarship suggests three avenues for this new theorization:

[f]irst, within the language of “social construction” which is still not the dominant view of caste; second, within a framework of “comparative analysis” with other principles of social differentiation and hierarchy, such as class and gender (which have been attempted before) and race and ethnicity; and third, within what may be called a “critical caste theory” (along the lines of a critical race theory) that seeks an understanding of caste within the larger goal of transforming the relationship among caste, casteism, inequality and power (9).

The first two avenues, both cornerstones of critical race theory in the United States are imbricated within the third. This need and demand for a sophisticated and comprehensive theorization of caste that utilized the architecture of critical race theory brings to the fore the limits and possibilities of an equivalence between race and caste. In particular, what was foregrounded in this call for critical caste theory was a social constructivist approach to caste, i.e.
the notion that what appear to be “natural” differences are “produced through material and ideological processes (of naturalization, legitimation, representation, and normalization) that operate within power, economic and cultural-ideological relations” (Natrajan and Greenough 21). Deploying the lens of critical race theory to social formations in India, what Melissa Rae Goodnight has, in the context of comparative education termed “theory translation” runs the risk of highlighting certain forms of oppression and discrimination while painting over other, and in some ways more insidious modes of creating and reinforcing inequity.

While Athhoi deviates from the norm in not relying on the visual and the verbal, body and speech, to construct difference, what it does do is demonstrate the efficacy of theory translation in practice. In sidestepping these recognizable markers of identity, it underscores the social constructedness of caste, and in the push-and-pull over Athhoi’s identity the “contradictory positionality of caste” (Dirks 293) where it both enforces and amplifies modes of exclusion and becomes the core to rally around of collective movements to fight against oppression. Critical race theory asks us to think of race “as a verb,” in other words to consider how people are raced and how they are treated as a result of being raced. This results in a focus on “the act of imposing a status and public identity” and, therefore, “even when racial identities are […] used to mobilize against race-based discrimination, race operates as a social fiction which requires work to sustain” (Mevorach 238-239). Thus, we see in Athhoi an adaptation of Othello that works not so much as a search for analogy in a different cultural context but rather as evidence for this analogy, i.e. not the affordances of critical race theory in the adaptation of Othello to an Indian context but the affordances of Othello in the adoption and application of critical race theory to the context of caste in India.
There are two strands through the play that reinforce Athhoi’s caste identity: we know that he belongs to a different caste because we are told it is so by Anagra and by Athhoi. Anagra frequently refers to Athhoi behind his back as “Lodha, you bloody swine”; “petty, bloody scheduled tribe” and is clearly resentful of the fact that despite his superiority according to accepted social dictates—he is a Kulin Brahmin and educated abroad—he comes second to Athhoi in everyone’s affections including his own father’s. This resentment that someone from a lower caste could have achieved the success he had reflects a growing national sentiment against the reservation policies put in place by the government for the upliftment of socially and economically backward sections of society. Coupled with Anagra’s irrational association of his mother’s death with the coincidental arrival of Athhoi in his home—You came and Mother went (Tui eli, Ma gelo)—the social and personal coalesce into a seething rage that appears at a remove from Shakespeare’s Iago.

Ultimately, Athhoi’s caste identity is shaped by a dialectic between what is conferred upon him by other characters and what he believes and embodies. Foremost among these others is Anagra who frequently makes casteist remarks about Athhoi in his asides to the audience. There are also two vignettes, one described by Anagra and another that takes place onstage, that cement Athhoi’s place in a dominant narrative of caste in contemporary India. Iago’s series of bestial metaphors—“an old black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe”; “You’ll have your daughter covered with a/ Barbary horse”; “your daughter and/ the Moor are making the beast with two backs”—find their analogue in Anagra’s description of an incident that took place in college (1.1.86-7;108-9;112-13). He describes Athhoi’s violent response to derogatory insults and taunts from fellow students and ends with an assessment of Athhoi’s character—“He appears quite
calm but inside he’s an animal” —reinforcing a stereotype that associates the bestial and the primitive with the lower castes, a natural persona that Athhoi might hide but one that he cannot escape. This vignette also strengthens, for members of the audience, the association between Athhoi and Rohith Vemula—both students who faced abuse because of their caste identity and both students who refused to accept this treatment lying down.

At another point in the play, in a moment that has no little to no impact on the plot, Athhoi is approached by another doctor who wants him to join a private hospital and offers him a kickback. Athhoi refuses. As repeatedly reinforced through the play, his goal is to provide accessible healthcare and support to underserved communities. Athhoi, as everyone in the village knows (and occasionally mocks) is morally upright, and seemingly impervious to temptation. This doctor then asks Athhoi what quota he joined medical school under—Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe? This reference to the reservation policies that set aside seats in educational institutions and government employment enshrined in the Indian constitution reflects a growing national sentiment of resentment to these communities and a growing demand of other communities to be included in the ranks of those eligible for reservations. The implication is that Athhoi’s education and subsequent professional success was a result of him taking advantage of the reservations offered to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes rather than a product of his own merit. If caste is fluid and performative, these are moments that depict both the tension between the “traditional” hierarchy and its modern avatar, and the ways in which these inform each other, the tension between the modern nation-state’s attempts to move beyond caste, to erase it, as expressed in the vocabulary of universal rights and the move to

60 Baire khub shanto, bhetore poshu.
“mark the body of subaltern castes with an excess of identification” (Ganguly 66). This little vignette reveals Athhoi’s position in wider society: he is criticized for not conforming to accepted norms and his skills are questioned because of his descent.

Athhoi’s own sense of his caste identity is deeply and indelibly tied to the trauma experienced both personally and with respect to the larger community. Through the entire play he repeatedly recalls his mother and grandmother and their painful deaths, the former from sunstroke from working in the fields and the latter from being burned alive on suspicion of being a witch. Though Athhoi himself doesn’t seem to have experienced this sort of violence, protected and encouraged by his benefactors, this inherited memory determines his sense of self as one who belongs to a community whose continued existence is marked by persistent trauma.

Anagra’s assessment seems accurate, in that lying beneath Athhoi’s calm and controlled exterior is a seething ocean of bitterness, anger, and pain. It is clear that Athhoi has molded himself into the man he is, that he feels a debt to Anagra’s father and as a paragon of virtue whose goal is to rid the village of corruption and to improve its living conditions, he exemplifies the figure of the lower caste man who is “worth” helping, who will make something of himself through hard work and who will slot himself into the space society has deemed acceptable for him. In marrying Diya, he shifts out of this place and in his refusal to play by the rules of society where one’s avowed personal moral compass and societal and institutional practices are frequently at odds, he refuses to be neatly slotted into this space. What is revealed in the process, however, is a sharp divide between two aspects of his personality. While Anagra reads this as a natural, animalistic and violent persona being disguised under a veneer of calm placidity, what it actually points to in

61 Though certainly not identical there are parallels here to the U.S. context, in which the post-racial world view is often juxtaposed with affirmative action policies.
terms of Athhoi’s characterization as we see it is the disjunction between what is deemed acceptable and appropriate by society and one’s lived experiences, between attempting to mold oneself into the only space that society will allow and the need to represent voices that remain unheard, between the internalization of social hierarchies and the spark of political subversion.

The production attempts to locate the cause of Athhoi’s mental collapse in this disjunction, this “double consciousness” but simultaneously runs the risk in the prominence of charismatic Anagra’s viewpoint of reinforcing casteist stereotypes of innate inferiority. Similarly, Anagra’s characterization walks a tightrope between being representative of broader social views—ones the audiences would recognize—and his very personal motivations of jealousy and resentment.

Is Athhoi a victim of caste oppression or innately violent? Is Anagra representative of socially dominant casteist attitudes or just maniacally jealous? What do we see and hear on stage—society or the individual? Or, more importantly, the production makes us question whether one can be separable from the other.

The performance of difference thus takes a sharp turn in Athhoi. My analysis of Athhoi as a desified version of Othello works to broaden the mode of comparison for critical race and caste theory from the legal, sociological, international rights framework to include that of performance. Performance moves beyond the top down vocabulary of the des, to include not just the stage and the screen but everyday interactions—moments of passing and the ritualistic nature of untouchability—to highlight an arena that serves to both produce and consolidate a rigid social hierarchy while also providing the means to subvert it.

Athhoi’s outsider status, his difference, is constructed by a series of vignettes in the play that demonstrate the performative and socially constructed nature of caste in contemporary India. In suggesting that caste is performative, I draw on two theorists. First, Judith Butler’s pivotal
theory of gender performativity where she distinguishes performance from performativity in which “the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’” (24 emphasis in the original). As is the case with Butler’s theory of gender performativity, caste—as a label that is socially produced and generative—relies on the performance, perception, and reception of norms that are socially understood to constitute caste identity. In contemporary India, this includes where one eats, who one marries, how one procures employment, and, significantly, how one votes. Second, Homi Bhabha’s use of the performative in his theorization of “writing the nation” which is split between the “continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical” and “the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative” (297). For Bhabha, the performative space of the nation or “the scraps, patches, and rags of daily life” is what “resists incorporation into and is a supplement to the accumulative, teleological pedagogy of the nation-state” (Bhabha 297; Ganguly 7). Bhabha’s formulation of the performative is the space and mode of what I have been calling desification. In Athhoi, we can see the overlap and tension between a politically mandated definition of caste—one that determines voting, reservations, and social positions—and the lived experience of Dalits today.

Conclusion

The 1848 Othello and the 2016 Athhoi performed approximately 170 years and one mile apart bookend the history of Othello in performance that I trace in this chapter. The 1848 Othello was performed within a colonial context in which racial divisions were clearly and starkly marked. The 2016 Athhoi is performed within a contemporary postcolonial context in which national politics have increasingly swung towards Hindu fundamentalism and where social issues like caste violence are papered over and sharp divisions masked in the name of national
unity. The 1848 Othello appears for all intents and purposes to have been a publicity gimmick though the responses of both the reviewers and the colonial institution reveal a deeply embedded racial anxiety.62 The 2016 Athhoi is fundamentally political theatre that is responding to the increasingly visible violence against Dalits across the country and attempting to (whether successfully or not) paint a picture of the divisions, prejudices, and biases that underpin contemporary Indian society.

These five productions analyzed in this chapter, when placed in chronological order, lend themselves to a teleological reading that traces the development of Othello in India from Anglocentric theatre to intensely local desified adaptations. Adhya, Krishnendu, Adil, Omkara, and Athhoi all share a similar marginal position and while their characterizations are a product of their particular contexts, they are also, importantly, a product of a shared history and tradition of performing Othello in India. What this chapter foregrounds, therefore, is a genealogy of Othello in India, marking the lines of familial resemblance but also tracing the development of the figure of the outsider from the context of an imperial imagination to a postcolonial and national one.

Looking at the three most recent desified Othellos, however, I suggest that there is also an important trend in the displacement of difference in performance. In Othello: A Play in Black

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62 Actor-manager James Barry’s somewhat controversial decision to include Baishnab Charan Adhya in his cast was one that appears to have been financially motivated—the Sans Souci Theatre once extremely popular and successful, had fallen into destitution—and the novelty of a “native” onstage was expected to attract the hordes. If Barry intended to draw attention to the production by advertising the novelty of its lead, he certainly succeeded. In the decades preceding this production, the fortunes of the small theatre industry had taken a turn for the worse, in part due to a series of mishaps that included the destruction of Chowringhee Theatre in a fire, the death of Mrs Leach (Calcutta’s foremost actress) in a stage fire and the scandalous suicide of Captain Deacle, the husband of Mrs Leach’s successor. The Sans Souci Theatre was a purpose-built theatre, founded by Mrs Leach and funded in part by donations from the public, that was intended to restore Calcutta Theatre to its former glory and though successful during Mrs Leach’s lifetime had, by the middle of the nineteenth century suffered a decline. James Barry’s production of Othello was intended to be the play that would change the theatre’s fortunes. See Chatterjee’s Colonial Staged for a more detailed reading.
and White, race and skin color are ostensibly displaced onto linguistic difference. In *Omkara*, caste is displaced onto skin color. And in *Athhoi* caste as a marker of Athhoi’s individual difference is displaced onto social and political discourse. These shifts are indicative of the intertwined discourses of race, gender, caste, color, and region within the contemporary Indian context. They are also indicative of the dual superimposed influences of colonial and contemporary global discourse in determining and informing contemporary Indian identity.
Chapter 3: “A little patch of ground:” *Hamlet* in the borderlands

The precipitating events of *Hamlet* can be viewed as political—a king has died, and his brother has married his queen and ascended the throne—or domestic—a father has died, and his brother has married his wife. In Shakespeare’s play, these spheres are inseparable, *Hamlet* is both the prince and the son and what is at stake is not just his own family, but the entire state of Denmark. Contemporary adaptations of *Hamlet* tend to struggle with this equivalence between the physical body of the sovereign and the metaphorical body of the nation so central to early modern notions of kingship, often compensating by emphasizing one aspect at the expense of the other. In the Anglo-American tradition, the dominance of a Freudian reading of the play has largely resulted in the erasure of its geopolitical backdrop, i.e. the complex dynamics between Denmark and its neighbors, presenting Denmark instead as an isolated and discrete state. Poland, France, England, and, importantly, Norway, rarely make an appearance in performances and criticism of the play.

Sandwiched between Hamlet’s banishment to England and Ophelia’s madness scene, Act 4 scene 4 appears in its entirety only in the Q2 version of *Hamlet*. Though a scene that is frequently cut in performance, it provides some of the most potent imagery of the relationship between a leader, his land, and his people. In this scene, Hamlet meets the Captain of Fortinbras’ army marching across Denmark to attack a frontier of Poland. It is this interaction that leads to a soliloquy that appears finally to spur Hamlet to action. Hamlet questions the Captain about whether the army is set to attack “the main of Poland” or “some frontier” (4.1.14-15). In response, the Captain describes the land they go to conquer as “a little patch of ground/ That hath

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63 All following quotations are taken from the Q2 version of *Hamlet* in *Norton Shakespeare.*
in it no profit but the name” (4.1.17-18). While he does not explicitly say they are attacking a border region, the description of this piece of land as lacking value for both the Polish and the Norwegians except in conquest implies just that. In the soliloquy that follows this conversation, Hamlet contrasts the army—“of such mass and charge”—and the imminent risks involved—“Exposing what is mortal and unsure/ To all that fortune, death and danger dare”—to the value of its object—“an eggshell” (4.1.46; 50-51; 53). In this dramatic chasm between risk and reward, Hamlet locates his own lack of action: he has clear motivations but has not acted, while Fortinbras’ actions absurdly outstrip what he will ultimately achieve. The last few lines of the soliloquy, however, bring the comparison of risk and reward to a head, shifting from Fortinbras to his army:

The imminent death of twenty thousand men
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? (4.1.59-64)

In this war for the material acquisition of a “plot”—a tiny piece of ground—and the more abstract acquisition of ephemeral fame and glory, the comparison becomes one between land and life. Inherent in this comparison, as Hamlet shifts between mockery and admiration, is the difference in the value placed on life and land, and the irony of the exceptional loss of life for a cause that cannot then support or contain that very loss.

In this chapter, I look at the assimilation, adaptation, and interpretation of Hamlet in three border regions of India. These border regions comprise two aspects: land and people. As in the
case of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the fates of these two are inescapably intertwined, but, the physical space is never called into question while the rights of the people living in it are frequently put in jeopardy. Driving this chapter are the following questions: where is the nation in contemporary *desified* adaptations of *Hamlet* and what do these border *Hamlets* suggest about the ways in which the boundaries of the Indian nation are envisioned and questioned? The three productions analyzed in this chapter appear at first glance to be very different: Pankaj Butalia’s 1989 documentary film, *When Hamlet Came to Mizoram*, Bratya Basu’s 2006 Bengali play, *Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata*, and Vishal Bhardwaj’s 2014 Hindi film, *Haider*. However, in being set or performed in a specific border environment that is arguably marginal in relation to a stereotypical perception of India, or the *des*, these adaptations of *Hamlet* all deal with the triangulation of the regional, the national, and the transnational in very deliberate ways: they underscore linguistic difference, make claims about an identity rooted in a particular space or region, and fashion themselves as speaking to a specific audience. This triangulation of regional, national, and transnational mirrors a similar categorization of local, national and global in Indian Shakespeare studies and global Shakespeare studies more broadly.

The dominant tenor of global Shakespeare criticism is one of transnational universality that privileges productions that can travel on a global circuit. The alternative trend in global Shakespeare criticism is an emphasis on the local, the rooted, and the insular, creating a fetishized and exoticized object of analysis for academia. In focusing on adaptations located in and purporting to represent border regions, this chapter attempts an alternative analysis of locally rooted productions of Indian Shakespeare that underscores their regional identity while simultaneously drawing our attention to the ways in which they are imbricated in, and work to construct, the national and the transnational. In the chapter focusing on Indian film in his book...
'Hamlet’ and World Cinema, Mark Thornton Burnett makes the case for “assessing Hamlet in terms of a rubrics of the region” to achieve “a particularized appreciation of how, in each film, setting and localization are vital components of a subscription to varieties of regional belief systems” (181; 159). In this chapter, Burnett places three filmic adaptations of Hamlet into conversation with each other: the Bengali Hemanta, the Kashmiri Haider and the Keralan Karmayogi. A focused analysis of these films in their regional paradigms allows us, he argues, to move beyond a limited (read: Bollywood) understanding of Indian filmic Shakespeares to “a fresh constellation of Indianized habitations” (182). Though each of the films under discussion in his chapter are located in border states or regions, Burnett’s focus on regional paradigms is more attuned to their particular environments—the poetic traditions, contemporary politics and cultural signifiers of these regions. My analysis of a similar, though not identical, group of performances focuses instead on the paradigm of the borderland and the ways in which Hamlet is mobilized to articulate multiple understandings of the margins of India as a modern nation-state. Thus, while Burnett’s objective is to “[facilitate] discussion about the contributions of the different parts of India to a larger whole,” my objective in this chapter is to grapple with the tension between these different border parts and the “larger whole” (182).

Borderlands have perhaps most famously been theorized in the context of the US–Mexico border. Writing as “a border woman,” Gloria Anzaldua describes the borderland as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Preface; 25). This “place of contradictions” is characterized by being both in-between and straddling two cultures; it is a site that is in a “constant state of transition” whose defining rupture gives rise to a third culture: the border culture (Preface; 25). This perspective of the borderland counters a state-centric one where the borders are not the hybrid spaces of both-and but rather the edges or
margins of the country that need to be defended at all costs. In other words, this view from the center is one where the borderland is not in a “constant state of transition” but rather a determined territorial boundary that is under perpetual threat of disintegration. The borderland from the gaze of the center marks the edge, the margin, or the periphery that is at once both an integral part of the nation and subjected to a different mode of governance in the name of national security and defense. The lived experiences in borderlands suggest that these spaces are the meeting grounds of multiple cultures and are characterized by both hybridity and division. A third perspective builds on these two to characterize the borderland on a more abstract level as a transnational space, one that is not necessarily exclusively determined or shaped by geographical proximity or historical contingency.

In her article “Borders, Boundaries, and Citizenship,” political scientist Seyla Benhabib distinguishes between the role of borders for empires and democracies: “Empires have frontiers; democracies have boundaries” (675). While the former is predicated on expansion, where legislation reaches outward from the “center to control its periphery,” in the case of the latter, boundaries serve to contain where “democratic laws require closure precisely because democratic representation must be accountable to a specific people” (Benhabib 675). In democratic nation-states, borders serve to divide; to separate into an us and them; to wrap, enclose, and contain. In contrast, the frontiers of empire marked both the limits of control while still looking outwards at the possibility of increase.

For the Indian nation-state, the border regions, in many ways, represent the limits of its democratic ideals. Though the narrative of Partition constitutes these borders as a singular, bloody, and artificial rupture through the subcontinent, these regions can attest to a more complex and layered history of multiple borders, overlapping border regions, contested loyalties,
and prolonged periods of division and union. Like a person with hyperopia, as we move zoom into the Indian map, the lines dividing the country from its neighbors grow fuzzier. The sharp outline of the official Indian map, representing a unified country with boundaries birthed at Partition, becomes blurry at the edges. The most obvious counter-examples to the myth of unchanging borders are the McMahon Line—the contested boundary between India and Tibet—and the Line of Control—the unofficial boundary between India and Pakistan. This chapter relies upon close readings of the performance or reception of Hamlet in India’s border regions and culminates in an analysis of one of the most globally visible examples of desified Shakespeare: Bhardwaj’s film Haider. Building on the paradigm of the borderland as figured in the previous two (less visible) examples, I argue that Haider, a film critiqued for its lack of political allegiance, is imbricated in a complex matrix of border metaphors. I demonstrate that these metaphors of liminality, hybridity, ambiguity, and dissemblance are made manifest in scenes of explicit performance.

**Hamlet-drama in Mizoram and the Documentary Gaze**

The blurb for Pankaj Butalia’s recently restored 1989 documentary film, When Hamlet Came to Mizoram, describes the purported objective of the film: “How Shakespeare’s Hamlet came to Mizoram and became a part of Mizo culture and life.” The film does not, however, track this narrative arc of Hamlet’s arrival and absorption into Mizo daily life but, instead, provides vignettes that detail the presence and impact of Hamlet in Mizoram, a northeastern state in India that lies sandwiched between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The film takes as its starting point the unprecedented popularity of Hamlet-drama, a Mizo translation of Hamlet by J.F. Laldailova. Though the text was first translated in the 1940s, the film focuses on a particular performance of Hamlet-drama in the 1980s. It contains clips of rehearsals, performances and preparations for
performances, along with interviews with cast members that are interspersed with shots of everyday life in Mizoram. Thus, this is not a film that describes *when or how Hamlet* came to Mizoram, but rather *what* Hamlet in Mizoram looks and sounds like.

Mizoram is one of the eight states\(^{64}\) comprising the northeast region of contemporary India, a geographically isolated region bordering Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Tibet whose relationship with “mainland” India is informed by a complex history of contested identities and spaces. The contemporary state of Mizoram joined the newly independent Indian nation as the Lushai Hills district in the state of Assam. In 1972, it acquired Union Territory status and in 1987 was formally incorporated as a state. This gradual shift from district to Union Territory to state involved on the one hand increasing degrees of autonomy but, on the other, worked to “[fix and frame] the Mizos in a geographical space, within a political entity called Mizoram” (Pachuau 13). This circumscription and isolation is particularly underscored by the presence of the Inner Line, a colonial era border initially intended to contain British expansionist tendencies. The Inner Line Permit, in place in the contemporary states of Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland\(^{65}\), requires people from other parts of India to apply for a pass—an internal visa of sorts—to visit for a limited period. On the one hand, this policy is intended to protect local populations and cultures from exploitation and extinction by preventing “outsiders” from acquiring land or businesses. On the other hand, the policy also reinforces the region’s geographical isolation along with its longstanding association with primitivism. Thus, from the vantage point of “mainland” India, the Inner Line concretizes an imagined separation that places

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\(^{64}\) Earlier referred to as the “seven sisters”—Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh—this region now includes the eighth state of Sikkim.

\(^{65}\) There are continued campaigns to include other northeastern states under this program, most recently Manipur. These campaigns have acquired renewed urgency following the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act as the act will not be applicable to areas under the Inner Line Permit.
this region in an ambiguous and contained border space that remains hidden, silent, mysterious, and alien.

There are several prevailing stereotypes about the northeast in “mainland” India; it is a region largely perceived and understood in generalizations. In her ethnographic study *Being Mizo: Identity and Belonging in Northeast India*, Joy Pachuau conducts a survey of common perceptions of northerners in the capital city of New Delhi, presenting several reasons for the “mainland” perception of northerners as alien or foreign to India. These range from physiognomy to language to the region’s associations with Western culture, Christianity and tribalism. According to Pachuau’s respondents: people from the northeast do not “look” Indian, a perception that acquires derogatory force in racist terms like “chinky;” they do not speak Indian languages as several of the languages in this region belong to the Tibeto-Burman family as opposed to the Indo-European and Dravidian families dominant in the rest of the country; they have loose morals, a value judgment predicated on the fact that the women wear Western clothing; and they are somehow external to “mainland” India’s social structure because of the predominance of tribal social structures in the region.

Within the broader context of the northeast, Assam dominates on a number of fronts: it forms the primary geographic link to the rest of the country, it has the largest population by a remarkable factor, and Assamese shares ties with other North Indian languages. Mizoram, on the other hand, has one of the lowest populations in the region at just over a million inhabitants, is one of three states in the country with a Christian majority, and has an international boundary that is one-and-a-half times as long as its internal borders, all serving to underscore Mizoram’s particular isolation both within the region and the larger country.
Therefore, the continued inclusion of *When Hamlet Came to Mizoram* in lists and academic research on Shakespeare in India decades after its filming and circulation begs the questions: where and what is Shakespeare and where and what is India in this film? Both are mentioned only in the opening title cards of the film, introducing the setting and premise for the film and hinting at the colonial origins of *Hamlet* in Mizoram:

**Opening title card:** In the North-Eastern corner of India, next to the Myanmar border, lies the state of Mizoram, home to Mizo tribals—a grouping of small tribes said to have migrated from the Yunnan province in China. The late nineteenth century saw the British army accompanied by missionaries reach these remote areas—leading ultimately to a huge spread of Christianity in the Mizo Hills.

**Second title card:** During the second world war, a young soldier in the British Indian army, J.F. Laldailova, used his spare time to write the first English–Mizo dictionary. He later translated five Shakespeare plays and Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* into Mizo. Over time, his version of *‘Hamlet’* became part of Mizo popular culture.

The first title card introduces this border region, framing Mizoram’s history as one that is intrinsically foreign, its people having “migrated from the Yunnan province in China” and heavily influenced by British colonialism. The land is definitively a part of the country, as the first few words of the film set up its location “in the North-Eastern corner of India,” yet it is apparently separate or distanced from the rest of the country: “remote areas.” The first few lines of the film throw up land/territory, ethnography, religion, but apart from the one tip of the hat to the historical origins of the Mizo in the Yunnan province, the rest of the film’s narrative draws on a colonial heritage.

The second title card shifts from the history of the Mizos to the accomplishments of one particular Mizo—J.F. Laldailova, a soldier and scholar who bridged the gap between the two cultures and languages. It is his translation of the play and its subsequent performance that is the subject of the documentary. While the opening title cards throw up three cultural categories: national, colonial, and regional (Indian, British, and Mizo) the framing suggests a focus on the
latter—the regional—that is always already mediated by the colonial. A history of Mizos before colonialism is quickly dismissed and India, or the nation, though introduced at the very outset slips out of the frame within the first few seconds. Therefore, it is tempting, and easy, to suggest that the nation or India is inconsequential in this film. However, I argue that there are moments in the film, its production and its reception history that suggest that the category of the Indian nation is crucial to an analysis of *When Hamlet Came to Mizoram*.

![Image of children reciting Hamlet lines](image)

**Figure 20** A domestic scene—children reciting lines from *Hamlet-drama* in bed

*When Hamlet Came to Mizoram* consists of a series of vignettes from Mizo public and private life interspersed with interviews from the cast members, rehearsals and performances of *Hamlet-drama*. The two vignettes that most effectively encapsulate the degree to which *Hamlet-drama* has permeated everyday life in Mizoram are a domestic scene—two young children lying on their stomachs in bed reciting the lines from Ophelia’s madness scene—and a public scene—the Mizo *Hamlet* cassette being blared out at a marketplace alongside displays of caps,
vegetables, sweets, music, and film posters. The film’s director, Pankaj Butalia, describes the first scene as evidence of the play’s popularity, comparing the “two children who lie in bed and recite dialogues from *Hamlet* randomly” to “Indians who know dialogues of the popular film *Sholay* by heart” (290). This comparison is particularly telling because it analogizes Shakespeare’s play with a popular Bollywood film, suggesting that the dialogue from *Hamlet-drama* has acquired a life that supersedes the theatrical or filmic medium. More importantly, however, Butalia’s analogy between the two Mizo children and “Indians” excludes the former from the latter category, aligning his readers and viewers with the Indian perspective.

In both scenes, however, it is an audio cassette recording of the performance that facilitates its dissemination and reception. *Hamlet* circulates, therefore, translated and remediated. In her interview for the film, the actress playing Ophelia describes the overwhelming popularity of the play on audio cassette—“It was unthinkable that someone hadn’t heard of it.”

In her essay on this film, Ania Loomba points out the significance of this level of popularity, “the almost obsessive Mizo playing of *Hamlet*” (227), stating that while “in absolute numbers the Mizo viewers [consumers of the play] may be smaller” than in the more “mainstream” context of elite English education in a metropolitan Indian city, “the film suggests that *Hamlet-drama* is consumed on a larger scale within that society at large” (242). “In Mizoram,” she suggests, “*Hamlet-drama* approximates a cult film” (242).

The film, through its subtitling, suggests that these bits of dialogue we hear correspond directly to the Shakespeare play. The voiceover of the opening shot of a flickering flame is subtitled: “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

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66 All quotations are from the subtitles of the film, which is entirely in Mizo.
This is not only a verbatim quotation from Shakespeare but a framing phrase for what the film purports to show its audience. However, though the dialogue recited by the young children in bed roughly corresponds to Ophelia’s madness following Polonius’ death, it does not match any of the lines in the play. The scene in the marketplace, on the other hand, does not have subtitles—Hamlet-drama is relegated to the background soundscape of this world. Interviews with the actors reveal a perception of the play as multiple, fragmented, and non-unitary. Rarely performed in its entirety and largely circulated via audiocassette where favorite bits are rewound and replayed, Hamlet-drama appears constituted by a patchwork of its greatest hits. The film, in part, replicates this association: the references to Hamlet-drama in performance constitute a patchwork of quotations from Hamlet’s soliloquies and the only two scenes we see in performance (Ophelia’s madness and the final duel scene) are repeated and revisited.

Figure 21 An outdoor performance of Hamlet-drama included in the film

See Loomba’s analysis in “Hamlet in Mizoram.”
What Hamlet was before he came to Mizoram, or where he came from, is given little space or attention (perhaps it is assumed we already know, or have that framework), the only reference being the Western costumes that the actors wear. This is particularly underscored by the parallels the film draws between Hamlet and Christianity in Mizoram cutting between scenes that explicitly relate to the play and scenes in church and Sunday school—“the Mizo’s have successfully effected an indigenization both of Christianity and Hamlet, infusing them with their own traditions” (Butalia 290). This overt equivalence between Hamlet and Christianity draws on a knowledge of Shakespeare’s arrival in India—“Shakespeare is a consequence of the Church, he arrives in Mizoram with the British and Evangelists” and the juxtaposition of public scenes and performance—outdoor productions of Hamlet to a rapt audience and collective singing of hymns in church—underscores this equivalence (Butalia 290). Mizoram is one of only three states in the country with a Christian majority and as Pachuau points out in her study, “the practice of Christianity in Mizoram has come to be distinctively Mizo in form, while also being a tool for organizing society” (157). Despite this predominance, “mainland” Indian institutional perspectives on the region tend to consider “[the] Christian component of culture . . . as a ‘modern’ or ‘recent’ engagement” frequently ignoring, negating, or diminishing its cultural presence “in the light of its supposed association with modernity and the West” (Pachuau 61). However, the parallels and connections between the Church and Shakespeare are not made by or referred to by the actors. This connection seems largely a product of the director’s external perspective, one which is attempting a critique of the church’s dominance and a representation of its absorption into Mizo everyday life.68

68 The original plan for the documentary had been to focus on festival and role of the church.
The quotidian quality of this documentary, what Butalia describes as “the surprise and comfort of the everydayness in Mizoram” (290) serve to capture what translation studies scholar S. Shankar calls “social translation”—the “gradual, collective, anonymous, and oral translation” that is so difficult to record and study (111). This translation of Hamlet into and circulation in the vernacular belies “the Shakespeare myth” of transnational universality and postcolonial appropriation. However, in this focus on the quotidian, the film also never explicitly engages with the politics of Laldailova’s translation and/or its adaptation for the stage. With the exception of the opening title cards, the entirety of the film is in Mizo with English subtitles, however, the subtitles that accompany the rehearsals or performances of Hamlet-drama often directly reference the Shakespearean text rather than being a translation of the Mizo lines. Therefore, it remains unclear whether there were any explicit shifts in the text that might signal a connection to contemporary Mizo identity and culture.

Thus, When Hamlet Came to Mizoram does not detail the journey of Shakespeare’s Hamlet to Mizoram, but rather provides a snapshot of the complex multimedial popularity of Laldailova’s translation of the play in quotidian Mizo life. In doing so, the film sidesteps an overt exploration of the political landscape of the region. It is this absence of an overt political stance in the film that serves as the basis of Ania Loomba’s critique of When Hamlet Came to Mizoram where she does draw attention to the film’s “coyness in looking at [...Mizoram’s] recent political history” (242). Defending this charge that his “film is not political,” Butalia explains that this is part of the form of the documentary—“there is a basic ethics of making a documentary—you have to be true to its characters…I did not want to manipulate my subjects” (288-289). In 1966, following the bamboo famine in 1960 and the lack of response from the Indian government, the Mizo National Front, a political party led by Laldenga, declared the independence of Mizoram.
from India. What followed were twenty years of armed insurgency, violence, and prolonged unrest in the region.\textsuperscript{69} The absences of any overt references to the insurgency in Mizoram (which ended in 1986) or the purposes of playing \textit{Hamlet-drama} in Mizoram are explained or addressed, Butalia contends, in the attitudes of the actors towards their characters, the use of traditional music, the framing of certain images:

\begin{quote}
You have to be able to read the politics into the images—the deeper meanings are for the audience to find. For instance, even an insignificant image like eating \textit{paan} and buying a cigarette can convey a politics of indigenous and Western cultures. My politics is not to give you an overt statement, a crass political reading, not just ‘slogan \textit{baize’}. But there is a definite and explicit politics in every film I make. I would call myself a political filmmaker—but I must be loyal to the form. So, my politics will not be an overt statement which will put people off (289).
\end{quote}

This extended defense stems from what Butalia perceives as Loomba’s critique of his film, but Loomba’s essay does precisely what Butalia requires of his audience—“reading the politics” not just in the images, but in the context and intertexts trying specifically to articulate the link between \textit{this play} and the Mizo context. Loomba draws a link between “the uses of mystery, of dissembling, suggested by the original play” and the emphasis placed on “loss, separation, and the importance of dissembling” in the actors’ interviews (243; 241). She suggests that it is Mizoram’s politically turbulent history that “through \textit{the very silences, anxieties, and denials that surround it}, gives a specific meaning to loss, to terrors, and to the importance of hiding what you are, to the inscrutability which Mizo’s seem to assert and value today” (emphasis in the original

\textsuperscript{69} The Mizo National Front was provided with ammunition and weapons by what was then East Pakistan. During this period the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was imposed in Mizoram, providing the army with an unprecedented degree of impunity.
This reading is one that is borne out in Pachuau’s reading of the Mizo memorialization of the period of the insurgency which, she suggests, is marked by “a silence on the subject on the part of the Mizos, despite the visible evidence of its impact in daily life” (131).

These silences are perhaps most apparent in the series of interviews with cast members ranging from Laertes, a semi-successful film actor who wants to lead a good Christian life to Horatio whose day job is Senior X Ray technician at a local hospital to Ophelia who describes the emotional overlaps between her own life as daughter and sister and that of her character’s. The most extended interview is with Hamlet, but it is telling that we do not get the perspectives of Claudius, Gertrude or Polonius, characters that are most obviously connected to institutional authority. The scene that Butalia refers to as “convey[ing] the politics of indigenous and Western cultures” (289) is the opening interview of the film where the actor playing Hamlet chews a *paan* and smokes a cigarette as he delivers his analysis: “When Hamlet came to Mizoram [chews] he...
became a Mizo [smokes].” It remains unclear what Butalia means by the “politics of indigenous and Western cultures” in this tableau, but it is apparent through both the images and his own reading of them that the dominant axis of difference (for him) is Western/transnational—indigenous/local, while “mainland” India remains tellingly absent through the film (289).

Later in the film, the actor details the ways in which playing Hamlet has affected him as a person, how he has learnt to cloak his feelings, to dissemble, and how he has become more solitary, isolated, melancholic and depressed. In doing so, he describes a complete breakdown of the boundary between his self and that of the character—“Many people don’t know my name—they just call me Hamlet and I too tend to slip into his role, mannerisms, persona as easily in real life as in the play.” Loomba reads these two statements as contradictory, i.e. that the opening interview suggests a transformation of Hamlet into a Mizo, while the latter interview describes a Mizo becoming Hamlet. This push and pull between two purportedly separate categories maps onto Butalia’s axis of difference: Hamlet, a foreign and transnational character, and Mizo, a local and indigenous identity. However, this role, of course, is not simply a product of the words Hamlet speaks (in translation) but draws also on the actor’s embodiment of the character—Hamlet and the actor were never separate entities to begin with. Therefore, in this triangulation of Hamlet—English drama’s most famous protagonist—a Mizo—an identity peripheral, native and foreign to India—and H.Vanlalrawana—the Mizo actor whose identity has become inseparable from the role he plays—lies a reflection of the film’s central paradox. In its use of Hamlet to explore Mizoram’s place in the world, the film positions the cultural categories as represented by “Hamlet” and “Mizoram” as distinct and discrete ignoring, in the process, that the subject of the film—Hamlet-drama—is always a combination of the two.
Butalia’s defense of the film’s absence of overt politics, however, throws up a number of concerns relating to the form, purpose and interpretation of a documentary film, particularly given its distinctive claim to some form of representative truth. First, he interprets Ophelia’s reference to Laertes’ departure as a veiled reference to the insurgency:

The woman playing Ophelia does talk about how she can identify with Ophelia’s feelings for her father and brother. She says that Laertes’ departure makes her think of the many young men who used to go underground to join the insurgency movement and never return. Also bringing in the local lamentation songs for the dead into the Hamlet performance helps to connect it to the political situation in Mizoram, to its oral tradition and transference of memory, of old songs, from generation to generation (289).

The subtitles of the film, however, are more vague: “Even Laertes’ departure is typical of what happens here, many Mizo young men live away from their families like my brother does.” While
Butalia’s inference is certainly not unfounded, it rests heavily on speculation. The rest of the “evidence” he provides of the politics of the film stem from the aesthetic and narrative choices he made as a filmmaker. My point here is not to underscore the purported lack of, or artifice surrounding, the politics of this film but rather to point to the disjunction in Butalia’s goals as a documentary filmmaker. Earlier in this interview he describes the film as “a bit of an essay” that is “[challenging] the anthropological lens which is often used in documentary films. I am trying to use my own perspective here” (287). Later, as he defends the absence of politics, he claims: “the essence of the film must arise from the protagonists of the film, not from my own point of view. If I had to put across my own perspective, I would make fiction and not documentaries” (289). This is not to say that Butalia’s motives are disingenuous but rather that the disjunction, between the essence or truth of a documentary and the filmmaker’s shaping perspective, the former as journalistic authenticity and the latter as fictionalizing plays a dominant role in how we, as viewers, receive this film.

While the film undercuts the notion of a colonialist Shakespeare, the director’s mediating gaze imposes the categories of the regional and the national. This is a product of Butalia’s position as a “mainland” Indian, relative both to the subjects of the documentary and to its intended audience: a transnational elite located in the metropolises of India and the West. In response to a question about the film’s screening Butalia stated, “The film was screened extensively five or six years after it was made. In 1991, it was shown in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. I then took the film to the universities of Cornell, Columbia, New York University, Williams’ College […] I have also shown it at the Toronto Film Festival and also in the Cinematheque Francaise in Paris” (288). The DVD cover of the newly restored film has a similar list of international screening locations: “Cinema du Reel, Paris, France; Museum of
Modern Art, New York, USA; Cork Film Festival, Ireland; Toronto Film Festival, Canada.” The film was funded by Channel 4, a British television company, as part of the promotion of the UK’s multicultural policy. Intended for a Westernized, and largely foreign, audience, this film uses *Hamlet* and Shakespeare as a means of creating a film on Mizoram, to “shatter the myth about Northeastern tribals” for his urban audience (287). Shakespeare and *Hamlet* seem entirely incidental to his objectives.

While both Shakespeare and India are explicitly referenced in the opening title cards of the film, they then disappear and are not referred to for the rest of *When Hamlet Came to Mizoram*. In fact, the film seems to suggest a physical isolation from India, all references to popular culture and performance are either local—the Mizo drumming—or Western—Hollywood posters, popular rock music. India is outside the frame, but India is also in the camera’s gaze as the film both confirms and undercuts mainstream India’s perception of Mizoram—“a strange mixture of the tribal and the Westernized” (Loomba 235). Set in a region that only a few years earlier had been demanding secession from India, the film does not deal with overt references to the political insurgency, but the camera reveals prominent absences. In seeking to explain *Hamlet*’s unprecedented popularity in the region, the actors suggest that they “identify strongly with the play and its sentiments,” but what precisely those are remain open to interpretation. Similarly, Shakespeare recedes into the background—out of the frame—but the film nonetheless presumes a knowledge of the bard and his play in its audiences and the subtitles which frequently draw verbatim from the play serve to remind us that while the actors are referring to *Hamlet*-drama, Laldailova’s translation and the subsequent performance and recording, our frame of reference remains Shakespeare. It is what leads us to and enables us to see this film’s version of Mizoram. In its presumption of this knowledge of Shakespeare, the film
indicates its intended audience: the liberal, cosmopolitan and educated elite who still traffic in antiquated stereotypes about the country’s border regions. The border region in this instance is only accessed from the vantage point of the center; it is a region that constitutes that which is “not dreamt of” but needs to be known. The film suggests, however, that this knowledge can only be accessed when mediated by the familiar—in this case, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

**Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata in West Bengal and political paralysis**

The introduction to the translation of *Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata*, Bratya Basu’s 2006 Bengali theatrical adaptation of *Hamlet*, describes it as an adaptation in which “Shakespeare is consciously diminished and downscaled” (ix). Set in Garanhata, a locality in north Kolkata that borders the city’s red-light district as well as the cremation grounds, the royal household of Denmark is replaced with the “postcolonial squalor of a decadent capitalist Kolkata” (Introduction ix). First performed in 2006 by the theatre group Swapnasuchana at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kolkata, the play was subsequently translated and published in 2013. Thus, while the play was originally performed for a limited audience, its publication, translation and distribution, along with the particular visibility of the playwright, now a minister in the state government of West Bengal, has yielded a wider sphere of influence.

Hemlat, the play’s eponymous protagonist, is an unemployed and melancholic young man. His name’s “vowel dyslexia gives Hamlet’s name the right downwardly-mobile Bengali inflection,” positioning the story in a lower middle-class contemporary Bengali urban milieu (Lal “Enfant”). The play itself frequently underscores its diminished status in relationship to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which is not only the source for the plot but also the book that Hemlat is

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All quotations from this play are taken from the Bengali script published in a collected volume of Bratya Basu’s plays and/or the published translation of *Hemlat*. I indicate in footnotes which version and whose translation are being used. All transcriptions are my own.
currently reading. He chooses to stage a section of *Hamlet* during a community celebration of Holi and thus Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* occupies an analogous place to the mousetrap episode within its own plot. Harish (Horatio) comes across Hemlat reading *Hamlet* and reads out the title page of the book for the audience: “Shakespeare the great bard’s Composition—*Hamlet*—translated and edited by Sri Bidhubhushan Vidyavinode, B.A. and B.L. Authentic Edition” (Basu 82). Hemlat’s repeated quotes and citations from the play, particularly as a reference point for his claim to “princedom” underscores the disjunction between the “great bard’s composition” and the mundane reality we see on stage. Hemlat’s ordinary circumstances, the tinsel sword he varies, and the diminished stakes of his inaction, all serve to paint him as a Quixote-like figure who sees his life-story and the solutions to his problems reflected in a work of foreign, ancient, and translated literature.

In her essay on vernacular Bengali *Hamlets* on the Kolkata stage, Paromita Chakravarti chalks out the lines of familial resemblance between various adaptations of the play on the Bengali stage extending outward to considering the impact of the “Russian critical and performative practice of portraying Hamlet as a young rebel under an authoritarian regime” (44). Using the theatre criticism of Utpal Dutt’s “Dharmatollar *Hamlet*” (1971), and the theatrical performance of Asit Basu’s *Kolkatar Hamlet* (1973), she makes the case for a “tradition of Bengali *Hamlets* in which the protagonist is represented as a revolutionary who dies a martyr’s death in an often doomed political struggle,” one that draws on “the vernacular Marxist tradition of reading the play politically as a document of class strife” (Chakravarti “Vernacular” 42;49).

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71 *Shri Shri mohakobi Shekhopeeyar rochito—Hamlet—Shri Bidhubhushan Bidyabinod BA BL kortrik shompadito o anudito. Shothik shongshokora* (my translation).
This vernacular tradition of Hamlet refers not just to the translation and performance in
the local language—Bengali—but to the urbanization of the play where the prince and his
country become synonymous with the fortunes of the metropolis of Kolkata. Hemlat the Prince
of Garanhata is thus part of a crowded field of Bengali adaptations of Hamlet that are
specifically set in Kolkata, a city in decline. These include the theatrical adaptations of Asit Basu
(1973) and Bibhash Chakraborty (2011), as well as, most recently, Anjan Dutt’s film Hemanta
(2016). All of these performances use the Shakespeare text to dramatize the fortunes of a city
burdened by a colonial nostalgia, determined by its communist politics and overwhelmed by the
forces of economic neoliberalism.

However, Hemlat departs from this vernacular tradition of “Marxist socio-political
critique” by staging a play about the “failure of revolution” rather than about its possibilities
(Chakravarti “Vernacular” 49). While Basu and Dutt’s approaches gesture towards a “hope of
renewal and change through the sacrifices of the young” and Hemanta, which deals with the
 crisis and concerns of the Bengali film industry, suggests a path of redemption through the
journalist Hirak (Horatio), Bratya Basu’s Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata appears to offer no
possibilities of redemption or rebellion (Chakravarti “Vernacular” 53). In this “consciously
diminished and downscaled” version of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the fusion of the domestic and
the political plays out in the relationship between the two protagonists of the play’s title—
Hemlat and Garanhata—where the scope and the stakes of a country are reduced to a single
middle-class family and a derelict neighborhood. If we can call this desified or Indian
Shakespeare, where is India or the des in this adaptation, what version of the nation is it, and
what role does it play?
Like Hamlet, Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata begins with a sighting of his recently deceased father’s ghost. Unlike Hamlet, Hemlat’s father is described by others as a madman, prone to wandering about the streets and spouting lines from popular Hindi cinema. His name, Sadhan (shorted to Sadhu), carries with it connotations of purity, holiness, and perhaps even eccentricity in the contemporary world. His lifestyle—eating at cafes, riding trams, and watching movies—seems as directionless as that of the youth in Garanhata. The distinction is that he seems quite content with this life outside of the strictures of social convention, he hearkens back to the indolent lifestyle of middle class bhadralok (gentleman). Thus, Hemlat’s father’s death is not the crippling loss of a monarch or leader, but rather marks the final disappearance of a certain way of life. Even while he was alive, Sadhu was considered a relic of the past and his death worked to wipe away that last vestige of an earlier time.

Standing in stark contrast to Sadhu is his brother Kodu, whose name, homophonically close to kada or mud, carries with it connotations of impurity and dirt. An entrepreneur, Kodu has a catering business, is involved with exporting salt and tobacco to Mauritius, and is the person others turn to to secure employment. While Kodu has achieved the material success that others (i.e. society at large) seem to value, he is portrayed as crass, uneducated and politically opportunistic. Like Claudius, he too struggles under the weight of the guilt of fratricide. At first glance, Hemlat’s name appears to signify an opposition to his uncle and his father. Frequently shortened to Hem by his family and friends, this nickname, meaning composed of gold, carries with it connotations of precious materials, wealth, and new beginnings (hemanta refers to the season of spring). However, the second syllable, “lat,” immediately evokes the desified version of “lord,” a word that was used to refer to colonial officers and has, in more contemporary common parlance, acquired sarcastic overtones, implying someone who is too big for their boots.
Thus, while the play appears to be limited to a single family’s dispute, the symbolic overtones of the names of the characters of this patrilineal conflict indicate a more allegorical reading. Equally, though, these names suggest the impossibility of a straightforward interpretation of a conflict between opposing worldviews.

At the core of this play is a tussle over Hemlat’s ancestral house—the unspoken motive behind the fratricide. Kodu wants to sell the house to “promoters” who will demolish the house to make way for a modern high-rise, destroying in the process the roots of several generations, embodied in the family *tulsi* (basil) plant on the property. Sadhu and Hemlat resist, and the madness that precedes both their deaths “becomes the trope of both protest and impotence” (Chakravarti “Vernacular” 50). The fates of the house and its owners appear to be inescapably intertwined, as its demolition is linked with a simultaneous mysterious fever that assails Hemlat. The play does not seem to offer the family a viable alternative—swinging between the unrealistic aspirations of Sadhu and Hemlat on the one hand and the profit-driven pragmatism of Kodu on the other. At first glance, this play can appear like yet another all-too-familiar story of the destruction of familial ties over a property dispute. For all intents and purposes, therefore, the play seems to dwell on Hemlat’s family, its scope limited to the fortunes of a single family in a derelict neighborhood on the edge of a sprawling metropolis.

However, these two opposing worldviews have something in common—they are both paths out of the stultifying atmosphere of Garanhata. The introduction to the translation of this play describes Garanhata as follows:

[It] teems with illegal trespassers and immigrants across the Bangladesh border who eke out a living in the slums; the middle-classes with little property and less money who had once seen better days; the rising money-grabbing promoters and land-sharks trying to be the *nouveau riche* new middle and upper classes; dishonest politicians, businessmen on the make; small town shop-keepers; students; the unemployed, pimps, prostitutes, drunks and drug-addicts—all of whom combine to constitute the postcolonial derelict face of
Kolkata, Bengal and India in the late 20th century- early 21st century capitalist phase of our history (xiii).

Sadhu embodies the “middle-classes with little property and less money who had once seen better days;” Kodu embodies the “businessmen on the make” and Hemlat “the unemployed.” Garanhata represents the fortunes of a “neighbourhood in the older, northern fringes of the city that is rapidly, unevenly and even grotesquely transforming through the development boom unleashed by economic liberalization” (Chakravarti “Vernacular” 50).

If Garanhata is the subject of this tragedy, its effect on its inhabitants is of paralysis, though this is almost exclusively a male affliction. The youth of Garanhata, with the exception of travel agent Harish (Horatio) are disaffected and unemployed or embroiled in street politics. Like Harish, Shefali (Ophelia) appears to be immune to the malaise of Garanhata. Employed, productive, and motivated, unlike her Shakespearean counterpart, she survives, and it is her unborn child that signals the possibility of change. Running through the play is an emphasis on emasculation as the defining image of paralysis in this world. Hemlat frequently refers to himself as a hijra (eunuch), unable to act as a man and son would. For Hemlat, in this stultifying political environment, revenge and protest serve simply to entertain—“the masturbation of the middle class”—and the only action he can take is revenge against himself (Basu trans. 52). The play thus fails to provide a preferable alternative as, like his father, Hemlat succumbs to madness without effecting change. In their introduction to the translated script, Amitava Roy, Tapu Biswas and Suchandra Ghosh suggest that the closing tableau of the play, one that underscores a singular and patrilineal link between three generations, indicates the cyclical nature of this story.

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72 There are several broader references to dwarves as emasculated figures. They have a prominent presence in the political marches that serve as a backdrop to the play’s actions.
According to this reading, the Hamlet figure is like an avatar of Vishnu, called down to resolve a crisis in the world:

sometimes as a Prince in the rotten state of Denmark, sometimes as an urban Arjuna trapped between Naxalite-Maoist extremism and quietude, sometimes as the head of a corporate group caught up in the dirty world of business and high finances, sometimes as a weak, depressed youth born into a devastated post-war, post-colonial world of Garanhata, Kolkata (Introduction xvii).

Yet this is not a reading borne out by the play, its protagonist or its ending. Hemlat is ultimately unsuccessful as a revolutionary, unable to extract revenge. His only achievement is that, unlike his father, he manages to commit suicide. Thus, the closing tableau of the play—“Sadhan places his hand in blessing on Hemlat’s head, and Hemlat on his son’s head. All three freeze. Sadhan smiles. Hemlat gazes with unblinking eyes. The fire of the burning pyres rise in flames” (Basu trans. 77)—suggests instead that this cycle of impotence will continue.

This sense of impotence and paralysis infuses the play from its very outset. The extended opening scene of the play which draws on the watchman scene of Hamlet paints a picture of the two nightguards who stand watch out of boredom, despair and faint hope for a better future. Stuck in a neighborhood where they are “surrounded by madmen” they feel nothing new will ever happen:

Ponka: Nothing will happen for us. Nothing new will happen.

Bimal: What do you mean by new?

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73 Reminiscent of Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, these guards are closer in terms of the space that they occupy to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern than to their Shakespearean analogues.
Ponka: New means new. Something that if people see they run in excitement, when they understand their bodies and minds become animated, their clouded eyes become clear—something like that. Nothing now is like that. Everything is anemic. Everything is the same (Basu 77).

This is reinforced by the references to other locales and the possibilities of progress, development, and employment they offer—Tollygunge, which houses the Bengali film studios, Chennai, the city in south India where Hemlat was once employed, and Mauritius, which offers Lacchu (Laertes) the opportunity of gainful employment, taking him away from the never-ending cycle of planning community celebrations—“Dol, Rabindra Jayanti, Pujo, Bara Din” at the local neighborhood club (Basu 104). The rest of the country and the larger world exists on the fringes of the imaginations of the inhabitants of Garanhata—over there is where things happen, over here is where time stands still. While Garanhata appears stuck, journeying out from there does not necessarily offer the characters the escape from the rut that they see themselves in: Lacchu returns disillusioned from Mauritius, and it is while Hemlat is away that his father is killed.

Yet, underpinning the lamentations about the stagnancy and paralysis infecting life in Garanhata is the suggestion that there is a change or new dawn on the horizon. While Ponka suggests at the advent of the play that nothing new will ever happen, towards the end Lacchu mentions the rumors of an imminent change in fortunes—“Everyone’s talking about a new day


75 A list of festivals celebrated in Kolkata: Dol or Holi, Tagore’s birthday, Durga Puja, and Christmas.
that’s coming our way. A new dawn. It will be good for everyone” (Basu 104). Though never explicitly identified as such, the implication is that this “new day” marks the rise of the regional party, Trinamul Congress, which put an end to the over three-decade rule of the Communist party in West Bengal in 2011. The playwright Bratya Basu is currently a minister in this government. The play thus dramatizes the failures and impact of Left politics in Bengal and positions the possibility of TMC/third party rule as deliverance from this political paralysis.

However, these references to the specific political situation of West Bengal, though clearly a significant element of the play, do not preclude a reading of the play within the broader context of the nation. Garanhata occupies a marginal position with respect to the metropolis of Kolkata. Located on the fringes of the city that was once the capital of British India, Garanhata is a part of the older northern neighborhood, one that is temporally, spatially, and economically removed from the expanding modern southern neighborhoods of the metropolis. In addition to its links to a colonial and purportedly superior cultural past (it adjoins Jorashanko, home to the Tagore family), Garanhata, as mentioned earlier borders the cremation grounds and the red-light district. The presence of Bangladeshi immigrants reinforces Garanhata’s location not just on the border of a city but in a region abutting Bangladesh. Thus, while the play is ostensibly set in Garanhata, marked by its geographical proximity to the illicit, and death, and by its temporal links to a colonial wealthy past, this specificity simultaneously stands in for increasingly larger places—Kolkata, Bengal, and India. Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata positions itself as a play about the political fortunes of the state of West Bengal, and the country at large. In describing what it is that ails society, Hemlat exhorts Harish to look out the window to see ubiquitous greed

that propels every section of society to climb up the social ladder, stepping over (and on) those who get in their way:

Look out of the window. Go on, look. Look. Look at them. Some beggars desire to belong to the middleclass: some bourgeois wants to be rich, to belong to the upper class; some rich man wants to become another billionaire Birla.\(^{77}\) No, no, the trouble is that they are not just wanting or desiring it. They want to become whatever they want to become by blasting the backside of the have-nots with bullets (Basu trans. 14).\(^{78}\)

The words that Hemlat uses are vague and generic and while this critique of apathy and greed is centered on the inhabitants of Garanhata, it is one that extends outwards to the entire nation. The nation occupies a paradoxical position in \textit{Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata}. On the one hand, this neighborhood at the edge of the country (both literally and metaphorically) is one that is being left behind as the rest of the country progresses. Garanhata is frozen, unable to join the race towards purported progress. On the other hand, Garanhata serves as the limit case for the nation—at the very edge of the country, it is home to a rot that is seeping in, the collateral damage of rapid development and economic neoliberalism. Garanhata then, is the glimpse of the country’s future. Thus, the nation is both what Garanhata metonymically stands for, and what Garanhata defines itself against.

One short scene in the play crystallizes its position in space and time and serves as a guide to read its own political stakes. Towards the end of the play, Hemlat and his friends stage an excerpt from Shakespeare’s \textit{Hamlet}, a scene that serves as an analogue to the mousetrap scene

\(^{77}\) The name of one of the leading industrial families in India.

in the Shakespearean text. Like Hamlet, Hemlat orchestrates and directs the performance but does not participate, choosing instead to observe from a corner of the stage, remaining silent through the performance and its reception. The choice of performance is striking for a number of reasons, not least because even this remarkably abridged version of the play is abruptly cut short. Staged as part of the community celebration of the festival of Holi, ushering in the season of spring, the performance is introduced by Harish as:

This is not a translation but rather an adaptation. It contains many checkpoint dramas and gestures/signs of our times. In other words, we want to suggest: what if these events took place on our streets? (Basu 108).  

Already, this introduction is more apt for Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata than the translated version of Hamlet that they are about to perform, a self-referential analysis inserted by the playwright to underscore the political stakes of his adaptation. The performance that follows is a condensed mélange of the Shakespeare play in verbatim translation, popular film songs from the 1980s, and the jatra performance tradition of Bengal. Hamlet’s grief at his father’s death and his realization of his mother and uncle’s guilt is introduced by the narrator and then swiftly expressed by the chorus via a 1980s Hindi film song: *Ek roz main tadapkar is dil ko thaam loonga, mere haseen qatil main tera naam loonga* (One day as I yearn, I’ll hold on to my heart. My beautiful killer, I’ll chant your name). Hamlet’s speech announcing his decision to put on a play to “catch the conscience of the king” leads almost immediately to a narrative summary of the closet scene, Polonius’ death, and another song: *Dil aisa kisi ne mera toda* (Somebody broke my heart in such a way). The only piece of dialogue involving more than one actor onstage

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follows Shakespeare’s Act 3 Scene 4.39-49 almost line by line as Hamlet castigates his mother for her remarriage, an “act/ That blurs the grace and blush of modesty” (39-40) followed by a Bengali film song: Bolo na go kar maa tumi (Tell me whose mother you are).

The performance thus contains multiple registers from the ornate and formal “kothin bhasha” (difficult language) of the character’s speeches to the popular culture and multilingual reference points of film songs. It also focuses almost exclusively on the emotional and familial conflict at the core of the play, where Hamlet sees his father’s death and mother’s remarriage as intensely personal and heart-breaking betrayals. However, the responses to the performance from the onstage audience suggest a very different reading. Kodu, clearly recognizing elements of his own story, tries to put a stop to the play by insisting they go drink bhang instead, but other members of the audience object: “It’s good to occasionally have a bit of culture in this neighborhood” (Basu 109).80 When this does not work, Kodu tries a different tack by telling the party worker Sukhen: “Actually this is all insulting you” (Basu 109).81 The play is immediately shut down and Sukhen’s chilling threat ends the scene:

We’ll close everything down. You don’t know me. We’ll finish you silently. We won’t touch you, slap you, or beat you—we’ll just send you off with silence. You’ll sit at home quietly. No one’s fathers will be able to do anything (Basu 109).82

While there appears at first glance to be nothing politically outrageous in the actual performance, the very suggestion of this possibility results in the play being cut off. It is,

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80 Ei shob culture-tulture majhe majhe parai howa bhalo (my translation).
81 Eishob ashole toder khisti korchhe (my translation).
however, clearly an interpretation that can be applied to Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata as a whole, and about the potential threat of performance more broadly. It is through this performance that is both adaptation and metonym that the registers of film and theatre, popular culture and high culture are blended. It is also through this performance in its localized setting and audience response that Hamlet’s goal of performance as evoking a kneejerk response from the guilty is realized. Kodu, like Claudius, is clearly affected by the performance, but so is Sukhen. Paired with his threats to muzzle any dissension in the upcoming elections, Sukhen is the epitome of the entrenched party worker, aware that he is responsible in part at least for the stagnancy of Garanhata yet unwilling to acknowledge it.

**Haider in Kashmir and Chutzpah**

*Haider*, released globally in October 2014, was one of the most anticipated Hindi movies of the year, and in the weeks leading up to and after its release, spawned a media frenzy. The third in director Vishal Bhardwaj’s Shakespeare trilogy, this adaptation of Hamlet is set in Kashmir during the 1990s, a period of heightened insurgency in the northern border region. One of the film’s biggest stumbling blocks was that it had to deal not only with the “crowded field of ghosts” that accompany every iteration of Hamlet, but also those that attach to representations of the Kashmiri experience (Carlson 81). This resulted in inevitable comparisons, evident in the criticism of the film that focused on absences, gaps and lacunae in the representation both of Hamlet and of Kashmir: the absence of the Kashmiri pandits; the disappearance of the army towards the climax of the film; the absence of Horatio; the absence of clear political motivations.

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83 Portions of this section were published in an article titled “Absence and Repetition in Vishal Bhardwaj’s Haider” in Cogent Arts and Humanities in 2016.
However, its controversial reception had a lot more to do with its Kashmiri context than its Shakespearean source.

In addition to the Shakespeare play, the primary textual source for the film was *Curfewed Night*, a memoir written by Basharat Peer, one of the scriptwriters of *Haider*. A memoir that details the lived experiences of Kashmiris during the nineties, this is a book that self-identifies as an attempt to make up for “the absence of [their] own telling, the unwritten books about the Kashmiri experience” (Peer 98). By its very presence, this memoir highlights the lack of literature attesting to life in contemporary Kashmir. Three different nations—India, Pakistan, and China—lay claim to portions of Kashmir, a historically resource-rich and strategically important site for trading routes and contemporary conflict in this region is informed by the interests of these nation-state players. Kashmir’s relationship with the Indian state has been a fraught one. Its very inclusion at the time of Partition was marked by a promise for a plebiscite that was never fulfilled and remains a driving force in the region’s campaign for self-determination. In the over seventy years since Independence, Kashmir has remained on the social and geographical boundaries of the Indian nation—a territory that is at the heart of contentious diplomatic relations with Pakistan, it is a region that has been subjected to militarization, political repression and arbitrary state violence. In her essay “Life and death in the borderlands: Indian sovereignty and military impunity,” anthropologist Shubh Mathur describes the massively disproportional Indian military presence in Kashmir[^84] as one that “overshadows and dominates not only the civilian population, but also civil administration, the judiciary and elected state governments” (34).

[^84]: According to Mathur’s article, “Indian military presence in Kashmir since 1989 has been estimated at over half a million, fighting insurgents who have never numbered more than 3,000” (42).
During the early nineties, the time at which the events in the film take place, the tensions in this region had escalated as frustration mounted in response to rigged elections and violence on the part of secessionist groups. From this period on, this situation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir “has been framed in public as well as scholarly discourse as an instance of insurgency/counter-insurgency conflict necessitating the suspension of constitutionally guaranteed rights” (Duschinski 117). Basharat Peer lived through this tumultuous period and there are several elements of the author’s personal life, and by extension of the book, that have been worked into the film. Its depiction, in particular, of the pervasive state of emergency in the region, characterized by crackdowns and curfews and the impunity enjoyed by paramilitary forces, all point to this “suspension of constitutionally guaranteed rights” of the Kashmiri people. The extent to which this constant surveillance permeated the quotidian lives of Kashmiris is encapsulated in a short, easily overlooked, scene in the film. A Kashmiri man is unwilling to enter his own home, he appears frozen in place and no amount of cajoling from his wife will cause him to budge. He is diagnosed with “New Disease”—incapable of crossing the threshold of his house without being frisked and given permission to enter, he has been psychologically conditioned to expect this level of juridical intervention in his life. In this scenario, “Kashmiri civilians are cast as the suspects . . . subject to search and arrest, crackdowns, blocked roads and official and ‘undeclared’ curfews” (Mathur 42). The military presence and control is reinforced through, often arbitrary, “rituals of surveillance, ‘checking’, confrontation and impunity” (Mathur 43).

The majority of Haider takes place in Kashmir, and despite the numerous shots of wide, open spaces, the viewer is left with a feeling of curious constriction. There is something that is not shown, that remains beyond, oos taraf (on the other side). At the level of the individual
narrative, Hilaal Meer (Haider’s father) is the absent presence that haunts the film. At the level of the regional narrative, Pakistan is the largest and most pervasive absent presence. While Pakistan is rarely named, its presence and its function in the larger Kashmiri narrative cannot be ignored. This “other side” signifies the Pakistani camps that supposedly trained and armed militants of the Kashmiri insurgency, a place Haider was prevented from going to, sent instead to the university in Aligarh. However, this desire does not seem to have been eradicated, he returns, having studied the revolutionary poets of British India, and in a deliberate “slip” of the tongue identifies his destination as Islamabad—another name for his hometown of Anantnag, but more present in the cultural imaginary as the capital of Pakistan.

Figure 24 Sarhad paar (crossing the border)

85 While Pakistan is referred to more explicitly in the published screenplay, scenes that most obviously relate to the Indo-Pak conflict are excised in the actual film.
This is Ghazala’s great fear, that her son will choose to join the militants and in doing so ensure his eventual death. She utilizes the euphemism *sarhad paar* (crossing the border) to encapsulate both the departure and the journey, repeatedly asking Haider if he wants to go “there.” As a teenager in a community where “the border and crossing the border . . . had become an obsession, an invisible presence” Haider is tempted to become a militant, curbed only by his mother’s emotional blackmail (Peer 31). The Haider who returns from college is entirely different. He remains without a permanent home and in one of the largest deviations from Shakespeare’s characterization, Haider is unceasingly active in his search for his father. Almost always in the company of Arshia, his strong-willed and independent lover (a composite of Ophelia and Horatio), Haider is seen out on the streets in protest or gathering support. A number of the establishing shots of the film reinterpret this phrase *sarhad paar* visually—Haider on a boat crossing the river, Haider walking across his uncle’s courtyard, Haider talking to his mother in the middle of an empty, tree-lined avenue. He is continually placed on some form of long and often, deserted, path without a clearly defined destination. These “paths” often bisect the screen or extend out of the frame towards infinity further reinforcing Haider’s lack of guidance.

Though never explicitly referred to, the Line of Control—the de facto border dividing the Indian and Pakistani controlled sections of Kashmir—is automatically evoked in these images. Given Kashmir’s location and the tense political situation of the time, the relative absence of actual references to the border is surprising, but this is balanced by an excessive visual focus on barbed wire, fences, grills and so on that serve as reminders of both international and interregional divisions. Thus, the film hints not only at Haider’s desire to cross the border, but reflects this unrealized journey in its visual sphere, possibly reinforcing the inevitability of this border
crossing—one that is both spatial in terms of an actual physical shift, and as the first step of a transformation.

Other mainstream Bollywood films that take Kashmir as part of their setting consistently juxtapose it with a depiction of “mainland” India, the Indian nation. Kashmir is either the escapist fantasy, a paradise for love and romance, or it is a border region, a battleground that pits patriotic values against Pakistani loyalties. While Haider evokes these traditional depictions, they are set aside or undermined in an attempt to focus on bearing witness to contemporary regional realities, most significantly in the use of Kashmiri-inflected Hindi through the dialogue. Thus, the use of the Martand Sun Temple—a ruin from the eighth century and the setting for the play-within-the-play—Liyaqat’s (Laertes’) job at a multinational corporation in Bangalore—a metropolis in south India—and the bumbling interaction of Salmaan and Salmaan (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) with foreign tourists are rare reminders of the existence of the larger world, another world. This was also the world that Haider was exiled to by his family, afraid that, by remaining in Kashmir, he would be tempted to join the militants. In his chapter “Hamlet and Indian Cinemas: Regional Paradigms,” Mark Thornton Burnett draws attention to the ways in which “Haider temporarily mobilizes another Kashmir, one that smacks of the ‘Bollywood’ cinematic tradition only to problematize its associations” (162). Thus, cinematic shots of the landscape, hinting at the prior associations with a romantic paradise are followed by “bloody, bespattered slaughter” (Burnett 162). Similarly, the display and enactment of military power in a cinema hall, during the screening of a Bollywood film, further underscores the distance between the content and setting of Haider and that of mainstream Bollywood.

While Haider sets itself apart from conventional Bollywood treatments of Kashmir, it was criticized for its political ambiguity as, despite its depiction of brutal realities, it sidestepped
overt allegiance with a particular ideology. A few minutes into the film, Ghazala (Gertrude) interrogates her husband, Hilaal Meer, who has just smuggled a known militant into their house for an emergency appendectomy. She asks him: “Which side are you on?” His laconic response—“life’s” (“zindagi ki”)—sums up the approach that the film seems to adopt when faced with the uncomfortable questions of political intent and allegiance. By hiding behind a lofty moral ideal—the paramount importance of human life and the repeated mantra—“Revenge only breeds revenge”—the film sidesteps and, as several reviewers have noted, undermines the larger narrative that portrays the gritty and harsh reality of Kashmir at the height of the insurgency.

Haider, the film’s eponymous protagonist, is portrayed as struggling between his father’s wish for revenge and his mother’s dying proclamation: “Revenge only breeds revenge. As long as we are not free from our desire for revenge, no ‘freedom’ is going to be able to free us.” Haider ultimately does not kill his maimed uncle who, in turn, pleads for the mercy of death. One reviewer points to this as the film’s fundamental flaw, that it “is a revenge melodrama featuring a suicidal reckless hero who neither kills the villain nor dies in the end” (Kesavan). He goes on to rightly point out that this moment is a “curiously selective abjuring of revenge” especially in contrast to every other action that Haider has undertaken in the film. Another review presents the fundamental flaw of the movie as its attempt “to marry the Kashmiri narrative” to Hamlet as the former is fundamentally about aspiration while the latter is about revenge (Bhat).

86 Kis taraf pe hoon aap? (my translation).
87 Intiqam se sifr intiqam paida hota hai (my translation).
88 Intiqam se sifr intiqam paida hota hai. Jab tak ham apne intiqam se azad nahi ho jati, tab tak koi aazadi hamein azad nahi kar sakti (my translation).
One might read this depiction of the consequences of militarization as an indictment of the role of the Indian government in Kashmir. Along with scenes that portrayed, in graphic detail, the methods of torture employed by security forces interrogating suspected militants, this provided evidence for the charge that *Haider*, in criticizing governmental policies was undermining the authority of the nation and the ontological status of a homogenous national identity. On the other hand, one might make the argument, as many critics have done, that the film does not take this critique far enough, that in its portrayal of the violent militants it provides a justification for the use of excessive force in the region. *Haider* does not clearly align itself with one camp in this hostile conflict and it is this absence of allegiance exemplified in Doctor Meer’s reluctance to choose a side that opens the film up to criticism.

A similar open-endedness suffuses the end of *Haider*. While the film itself ends with Haider limping off a body-strewn graveyard, the published script indicates that there were two other options on the cards for the filmmakers: “*Option 1* - *After a few steps he falls on the ground. Option 2* - *Roohdaar* [Hilaal’s “Ghost”] emerges from smoke. Smiling he opens his arms, Haider falls into his embrace” (Bhardwaj and Peer 212). At this moment in the film, Haider’s mother Ghazala (Gertrude) has detonated a suicide bomb, his lover and friend Arshia (Ophelia) is dead, his uncle Khurram (Claudius) lies maimed and dying in the graveyard, and Haider has joined a group of militants stockpiling weapons in the gravedigger’s house. The options that the published script suggest either death or militancy as Haider’s future. While the film does not shut down either of these options, it does not depict one. This open ending compels us as viewers to move beyond a simple and superficial categorization, forcing us to interrogate the very system that underpins the binary of political allegiance, where to critique the Indian army is to
automatically undermine the nation and to depict the violent struggles of the Kashmiris is to deny their right to self-determination.

The answer, I would argue, lies in Bhardwaj’s manipulation of the trope of the body politic that is central to *Hamlet*. *Haider* is not the narrative of an individual tragic protagonist who stands in for a nation-state, Haider’s is one story among many. This is a tragedy of a region. The sense of collective tragedy is exemplified by the presence of crowds during what would correspond to soliloquies in the Shakespearean version. Hamlet’s most famous line—“To be or not to be” with its implied singular agent is translated into a slogan chanted by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons—"Shall we be or not be?" Haider’s path in the film requires him to challenge institutional authority—the police, the army, the law—and to join a collective moment. He chooses to describe both the flagrant violation of the law and his continuing provocation as “chutzpah.”

Appropriated from Yiddish through the conduit of OSHO talks, “chutzpah” is instituted as one of the central tropes of the film—a characteristic that Haider alternately critiques and adopts. Incongruous usage of the word “chutzpah” peppers the film. Mispronounced and often misunderstood, it serves as a placeholder, its meaning constantly shifting. It is never translated, never defined as a word, remaining permanently in the abstract, it requires demonstration to be made intelligible. Unlike the other English words that pepper the film—crackdown, curfew, militant etc.—this remains marked by its foreignness, resisting translation or definition.

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89 *Hum hain ki hum nahin* (my translation).

90 The examples that Haider uses are all taken from an OSHO lecture entitled “Sex is a Basic Problem” from the series *Discipline of Transcendence*. These audio recordings by the controversial godman Rajneesh continue to be available on the OSHO website. In this lecture, he also mispronounces “chutzpah,” so it is likely that the makers of *Haider* adopted the same pronunciation. However, the connection between chutzpah, *chutiyapah* and AFSPA appears to be original to the film.
Chutzpah is first introduced via voiceover: we hear Haider’s voice spelling it out while we watch it being enacted as armed officers frisk a couple of men in a dimly lit alley for no apparent reason. The scene then shifts to a small video store operated by Salmaan and Salmaan, the incredibly over-the-top analogues to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Their video store is a shrine to their movie idol and namesake Salman Khan, a Bollywood actor known for his trademark machismo. Decorated with paraphernalia from Khan’s films, as well as several other international and national movie posters like *Lion of the Desert*, *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*, and *Andaz Apna Apna*, the store is both clearly located in the early nineties and a site that lionizes a hyperbolic form of masculinity and one of the very few settings in the film that reference a life and world outside of Kashmir. It is in this transnational space of escapist entertainment that the three friends come to the drunken conclusion that chutzpah is both a homophone and a synonym of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) the draconian legislation that grants immunity from prosecution to the military, allowing them a degree of

![Figure 25 In the video store](image-url)
unprecedented authority and freedom. Additionally, the mispronounced “chutzpah” is a homophone of Hindi profanity “chutiyaapahn” (bullshit) providing the filmmakers with the ability to get this particular critique of structures of authority past the censor board. By placing this association between “chutzpah” and AFSPA in the mouth of a stoned buffoon, the film similarly sidesteps criticism.

Haider, in introducing this word to the buffoonish Salmaans, uses an example expounded in an OSHO talk: a boy charged with murdering his parents seeks leniency from the judge because of his newly acquired orphan status. It is apparent from the outset that Haider considers this brazen position as symbolic of the Indian army’s impunity-fueled actions in Kashmir. AFSPA is one of “an arsenal of laws giving the military unlimited powers of search, arrest, seizure, destruction of houses and the right to shoot to kill to maintain public order, without civilian or judicial oversight” (Mathur 36). Importantly, this emergency law, a relic of the colonial era, has been used in border regions of India as “part of the normal administrative apparatus” (Mathur 34). AFSPA allows members of the military to kill militants with impunity, a law that continues to be abused today as “fake encounters” or the rewriting of extra-judicial killings as necessary force for the maintenance of public order, protect the military from prosecution. It is this legislation that is predicated on the suspension of constitutionally mandated juridico-political order that creates the “state of exception” identified by Giorgio Agamben in his book Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. This is a state of exception that is not limited to the camps but encompasses the entire region—Kashmiris can and have been killed by the state without it being classified as homicide.

However, towards the end of this scene, Haider uses the word “chutzpah” to describe what he will do next:
Salmaan 2: What will you do now here?

Haider: That…chutzpah…Search…for my father.

Salmaan 1: Where? In the camps?

Salmaan 2: In prisons?

Haider: All of Kashmir is a prison my friends. I’ll search for him everywhere.\(^91\)

In other words, his unceasing search for his father will be an act of chutzpah: both gall and bullshit, both daring and completely pointless. The word chutzpah reappears twice in the film: first in Haider’s madness scene at Lal Chowk in Srinagar, and next as he manages to outwit the armed Salmaan and Salmaan who have been instructed to kill him. In the former instance, he still uses it to describe the actions of the Indian army—chutzpah is something that has happened to Kashmir—but in the latter instance chutzpah is his internalized mantra to himself before he kills his former friends. Chutzpah sums up the situation of the Kashmiris, where the authorities seem to have the audacity to punish them for crimes committed on them, but it also seems to present that path that Haider takes—the audacity of performing on the street and encouraging protestors; the audacity of performing “Bismil” at his mother and uncle’s wedding. More than intiqam or revenge, this is Haider’s mantra, he revels in the ability to shock, to beat others at their own game. Intiqam is what his father demands but chutzpah is what Haider delivers.

Chutzpah, thus, is not simply appropriated from one language to another, it shifts in Haider from one figure of speech to another: from a noun that indicates a quality or characteristic, it becomes a verb or action that is undertaken. This is a shift that is perhaps most

\(^{91}\) Salmaan 2: \textit{Ab tu kya karega yahaa?}  
Haider: \textit{Wahi…chutzpah…Dhunduga…Abbuji ko}  
Salmaan 1: \textit{Kahaan? Kampo mein?}  
Salmaan 2: \textit{Kaidkhanaa mein?}  
Haider: \textit{Pura Kashmir kaidkhana hain mere dost…har jaga mein dhunduga.}
explicitly articulated in the film’s two scenes of performance. The first, Haider’s scene of
madness, relocates Hamlet’s most private questioning of life and existence to the most public of
spaces and vocabularies. Haider has finally acquired evidence of his father’s murder. Dressed in
tattered clothing, his head shaved, a rope around his neck and a boombox slung across his body,
he has occupied Lal Chowk (the center of Kashmir’s capital Srinagar and a symbolic space of
protest) and is addressing a large gathering. The film plays with the overlapping and opposing
spaces of the public and private in this performance of madness as the shots shift between close
up, low-angle and frequently intimate emphases on Haider to wide-angle or high-angle shots that
reveal the size of his audience. Dominated by a central clocktower, Lal Chowk lends itself to a
performance in the round with people surrounding this central focal point. However, Haider’s
audience remains, proscenium-like in front of him while the roads behind him are deserted,
sharpening the border zone identity of the space. Haider is also clearly playing with the notion of
performance as protest, madness, and chutzpah, shifting between various stances that indicate the
performativity of the moment—he is a puppet, multiple characters in a bank robbery, an obedient
officer, a madman who uses the rope around his neck as a microphone, and finally a loyal Indian
subject.

With almost breathtaking speed, Haider moves from international law to chutzpah to
AFSPA. He begins by listing three documents in English—the UN Council Resolution number
47 of 1948, Article 2 of the Geneva Convention and Article 370 of the Indian Constitution—that
have determined Kashmiri identity and power over the last seventy years, reducing the
complexities and legalities of these documents to one question:
Do we exist or do we not? If we do, then why, if not when where have we gone? If we exist, then for what and if we’re gone, then when did we go? Sir…did we ever exist or not? Chutzpah has happened to us.\textsuperscript{92}

Figure 26 Madness scene in Lal Chowk

To his captive audience Haider explains chutzpah by acting out a scene in which a successful bank robber then saunters over to the cashier to open an account. This comical scene is followed by a dramatic shift in tone when he explicitly makes the connection to AFSPA, reciting (in English) Section 5 rule 4 of the act that provides impunity to the armed forces in areas where the act is in place. The last two words of this act lead to the last section of his performance: a rhythmic dance-like sloganeering:

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Hum hain ki hum nahin? Hum hain toh kyun hain aur nahin hain toh kahaan gaye? Kyun hain toh kis liye aur kahaan gaye toh kab? Jenab…hum the bhi ki hum the hi nahin? Chutzpah hog aye humare saath} (my translation).
Law and order, law and order…order order, law and order.

Na law hain na hain order. (There is no law, there is no order)

Jiska law hain uska order. (Who has law, they have order)

Made on order law and order.

India Pakistan ne milkar khela border border, (India Pakistan together play a game of border)

Order order, law and order.

Na ab chore hune Hindustan, na ab chore hune Pakistan. (Hindustan doesn’t leave us alone, Pakistan doesn’t leave us alone)

Par koi to humse bi puchho, ki hum kya chahte? (But why don’t they ask: what do we want?)

The almost Pavlovian reply from the crowd is azadi (freedom); a call and response that is deeply embedded in the Kashmiri psyche. This scene marks a turning point in Haider’s mission, his focus is no longer solely revenge but rather an opposition to the larger corrupt system. It is at this point that Khurram, accompanied by officers finally makes it to the head of the crowd. On seeing them, Haider breaks into the patriotic song by Muhammad Iqbal: Saare jahaan se acha,
*Hindustan humara* (Better than the entire world, is our Hindustan). Through this cultivated stance, Haider reveals the performative irony of patriotism. Equally, the agitated Khurram reveals the power and threat of performance: Haider’s audience is responding to him, his politics may be infectious.

The perspectives established in this first scene of performance are echoed in the later and most central and explicit scene of performance in the film—the play within a play. Haider, along with a troupe of dancers performs the song *Bismil* in the style of the Kashmiri Bhand Pather tradition, at the ruins of the Martand Sun Temple to celebrate the marriage of his uncle, Khurram, and his mother, Ghazala. The angles and shots of this scene echo the previous one, but Haider is a more assured, calculated, and smooth performer. Unlike the international vocabulary of the scene of madness, this performance relies on a local performance tradition; Haider is no longer the sole “insane” orator to a gathered crowd but rather part of a carefully orchestrated group; and while the dominating tropes of madness and grief allowed for a pointed critique of structures and institutions of power, the language and performance of *Bismil* is abstract, complex, and poetic. In the shift from legalese to poetry it appears as though the film (for all its promise as an adaptation centered on the political conflict of *Hamlet*) has shifted once more to the domestic and the familial.

The chorus of the song indicates the two protagonists: Bismil—“the wounded one” and bulbul “the nightingale.” Unlike the Mousetrap in *Hamlet*, Haider’s play-within-a-play seems instead to be an exhortation to his mother: “Oh nightingale of the hurt one/ Don’t meet the flower.”  

93 *Bismil bismil bulbul-e-bismil/ Mat mil mat mil gul se mat mil* (my translation).
relentless beating of a heart—all elements of classical love stories, perhaps fit for a performance at a celebration of marriage. The first shift in the song comes, however, when Haider sings: “Listen world as I explain, as I repeat your story,” exhorting the world to listen, but also explicitly pointing out that it is their story he is going to be repeating. The next stanza introduces a third character, in addition to the innocent nightingale and the simple male, there is a falcon with “death hidden in his wings,” whose goal is a palace. This falcon then proceeds to poison the dreams of the nightingale and the flowers she encounters. The following stanza describes the falcon’s actions: “He scattered gunpowder in the valley and spread nets in the lake/ With knives he cut both the wings of the poor male.” This mixture of figurative and literal language

Figure 28 The female, the falcon, and the male.

94 Sun le zamaana samjhata hoon, teri kahaani dohraata hoon (my translation).

95 Vaadi mein chhidka baarood jheel mein jaal bichha daale/ Chhuriyon se bechaare nar ke dono pankh kata daale (my translation).
disconcerts the audience: the expected vocabulary of romance now suddenly includes the real and lived violence of the Kashmir Valley.

It is unclear how many characters there are in this tale. While the nightingale and the wounded one clearly map onto the female and male, the third figure is described by a variety of terms: falcon, criminal and coward and it remains unclear whether they are all one. This is borne out by the fact that while a dancer wearing a falcon mask plays the role in the first mention, the climactic moment of the song has the third party/enemy played by a massive two-faced black-and-red puppet, as the ensemble sings: “He imprisoned the wounded male and bound him in chains/ He threw his heart into the water from Baramulla bridge.”96 The subject of the sentence isn’t clear though it is implied to be the cruel, ambitious, and poisonous falcon. This ambiguity is contrasted with the specificity of the action being described: precisely what happened to Haider’s father and where. The song has clearly moved from the abstract and generic (mountains, valley, and nightingale) to the extremely specific markers of Kashmir.

The last stanza of the song underscores the specific location of the tale, referring to the Jhelum river and to Kashmir, and ends with an exhortation to the nightingale to come to her senses. Throughout the song, the camera cuts between Haider and his companions’ performances to the reactions of the seated audience, particularly those of Ghazala and Khurram as they start to recognize elements of their own story in the performance. The fact that Haider ends his dance on his knees in front of Khurram, the final kick flicking a speck of mud onto his uncle’s face, underscores for us, as the audience, that Khurram is the culprit, the falcon, and the coward of the song. However, the performance when viewed in its entirety leaves open several layers of

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96 Zakhmi nar ko qaid kiya, zanjeeron mein bandhwaya/ Baramulla ke shiri pul se dil paani mein phinkwaaya (my translation).
interpretation that cannot be contained within a reading of a domestic, intrafamilial love triangle. In fact, the betrayal of kinship is never even hinted at and the falcon’s actions refer primarily to the destruction of the natural expanses of Kashmir. The shift to the gigantic puppet that actually serves to mime the action of throwing the man into the water symbolizes a much larger and stronger Janus-like power. While this could quite easily map onto Khurram, it is possible only because of his political connections. If we consider the falcon and this larger menacing figure as two separate but connected characters, Khurram, whose political ambitions are geared towards leaving Kashmir for Delhi, is clearly the ambitious falcon searching for a castle, while the ambiguous portentous puppet is the institutional strength of the Indian army that enables him.

The particularities of Haider’s story then dissolve away, leaving the song not as an allegory for his family but for his region—the call to the nightingale: *hosh mein aaja* (come to

![Figure 29 The two-faced black-and-red puppet](image)
your senses) is not just a call to Ghazala to open her eyes to the duplicitous actions of her new husband, but also a call to Kashmir—the crowds of people lining the edges of the ruins to come to their senses. The stripping of wings from the bechaare nar (poor man) is not simply the imprisonment of his father but is symbolic of a loss of freedom for an entire region. In this scenario, Khurram is not simply the villain of the story, but a product of the prison that is Kashmir. He is as much a puppet as everyone else, trying to save his own interests and to survive an impossible situation.

Through these two scenes of performance it is clear that Haider is slowly giving himself over to the cause—the fight for self-determination and a separate state. By the end of the film, Haider is completely one of the militants and his decision not to kill Khurram seems inconsequential in comparison to the ideological transformation he has undergone. Echoes of his father reappear once again, the politically neutral doctor of the opening sequence transformed into the stubborn prisoner who refused to shout Jai Hind just as the grieving son transformed into an insurgent. However, while chutzpah provides Haider an alternative to intiqam, it nonetheless works to describe the very actions of the military that he criticizes. In the context of the film, therefore, it’s unclear whether Haider’s actions are to be endorsed, justified or criticized.

The film negotiates this tension in the twinned figures of Doctor Meer and his “Ghost” whose political allegiances remain ambiguous and slippery. The catalytic plot element in Hamlet, the Ghost of the murdered King, is skillfully re-imagined in Haider as Doctor Meer is “disappeared” by the authorities. The use of the verb “disappear” in the transitive sense has become increasingly common in political discourse, particularly in the Kashmiri context where the phenomenon of “enforced and involuntary disappearance” is estimated to have between 8,000 and 10,000 victims (Rashid 14). Arrested as suspected militants or to serve as cautionary
examples to those around them, these disappeared people were often victims of torture and extra-
judicial killing, resulting in the absence of marked graves—the acknowledgment of the finality of death.

This disappearance is perceived only in terms of an absence from everyday life: a gap or blank around which everyone else’s life is defined. Disappearance, as a liminal state between life and death, is only experienced by those who remain, those who have not been disappeared. Ghazala joins the community of women dubbed “half-widows”, defined by a condition of perpetual anticipation, awaiting the unlikely return of their husbands or a confirmation of their death. Haider remains in a state of mourning and denial; he does not receive confirmation of his father’s death until more than halfway through the film, thus collapsing the prolonged period of vacillation that characterizes Hamlet’s indecisiveness. Even Khurram, the mastermind behind this situation, is identified as the disappeared doctor’s brother. This repeated articulation of an absence, an inescapably dominant presence of absence, runs through the film, controlling the viewer’s response from the opening sequence on.

The first five minutes of Haider present Hilaal Meer as a somewhat naïve but goodhearted doctor, firmly establishing a sympathetic character that is violently excised both in the narrative and from the structure of the film before the main story begins. In what is one of the most chilling scenes of the movie, a “masked mukhbir, a Kashmiri man who had become a collaborator and identified militants and their supporters” sits in an armored car and with a small flick of his head or the jarring honk of the horn decides the fate of the men lined up in front of him (Peer 52). As Meer comes to the head of the line there is a long pause before the mukhbir makes his decision, a moment in which we can see his reflection in the rear-view mirror occupying a small section of the frame. The majority of the frame comprises the rather mundane
and ordinary interior of the car rendered different by the grills that serve as indexes not only of militarization, but also reinforce the divisions, borders and hierarchies of power that underpin this narrative. The camera zooms in on the mukhbir’s face, one can only interpret the expression in his eyes, slight facial movements under the mask—recognition, hesitation, decision. The car horn sounds. The camera cuts to Meer’s eyes, framed by his glasses. This deliberate parallel gestures at some form of similarity, one of the many signposts the film sets up. The face of the man behind that mask remains anonymous, but there remains a very strong implication that it is Khurram (Claudius). A few minutes later, before Hilaal is dragged off to an unknown fate, he watches his home go up in flames. It is at this moment that the screen fades to black and the opening credits of the film begin. Graham Holderness uses the term “vanishing point” to forward his reading of Hamlet where the “reality of the play is . . . constituted by the unseen, by what

Figure 30 The masked mukhbir
vanishes” (158). For Holderness, one of the starkest examples of this is in the literal vanishing of the Ghost that marks the border between the living and the dead, a moment that demonstrates a reading of the play as one characterized by bereavement. This pervasive sense of loss is a characteristic feature of *Haider*. The “vanishing point”, the explosive loss of the childhood home and the chilling and uncertain loss of the father, structures the rest of the film both as an attempt to retrieve this loss and as an extended bereavement, placing the viewers in a similar position to Haider before they even encounter the character.

*Haider* replaces the apparition of a specter97 with the enforced disappearance of Hilaal Meer. The catalytic plot element is not the Ghost’s injunction, but is, instead, its very opposite: the unexplained and merciless arrest of Hilaal Meer. We never hear Meer’s story from his own lips and are forced, as a consequence, to construct our image of this man from other characters’ fragmented memories. For the better part of the film, his motivations remain opaque and his political allegiance unclear. What propels the narrative forward, therefore, is not the knowledge or suspicion of foul play, but rather its very absence. As viewers we are forced to contend with these questions: Why has he been arrested? Where was he taken? Will we ever see him again?

The Ghost in *Hamlet* occupies an indeterminate ontological space, at once both physically present and absent. At the outset of *Haider*, Hilaal Meer is thrust into an indeterminate politico-

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97 In his seminal book *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida uses the figure of the Ghost in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a springboard from which to theorize the neologism “hauntology.” He writes, “To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time” (Derrida 202). For Derrida, hauntology replaces the primacy of its near homonym ontology and it is the indeterminacy of the figure of the Ghost in *Hamlet* that straddles the border between the present and the absent, the living and the dead, the past and the future that provides the first step for Derrida’s extended exegesis. He points out that the play begins with the appearance of the Ghost, or rather, with the anticipation of the re-appearance of the Ghost. The paradoxical repetition and singularity inherent in the appearance, disappearance and re-appearance of the Ghost demonstrates that hauntology “harbor[s] within itself eschatology and teleology themselves” (Derrida 10).
juridical space where he is, by social and legal standards, at once present and absent, alive and
dead. This paradigm shift from spectrality in the material domain to that in the juridico-political
one points to a central concern of the film, and of the Kashmir issue at large, where people are
not merely subjected to physical state-mandated violence, but where the very definition of a
person as a legal, political and social entity, i.e. a citizen, is called into question.

However, like the Ghost in *Hamlet*, Hilaal “continues to exist” outside the chronological
narrative of the film, in memory and in “signs employed to represent that lost presence”
(Holderness 165; 160). Hilaal Meer haunts the rest of the movie not only in his position as a
disappeared person—perceived to be neither living nor dead, or simultaneously both living and
dead—but in the form of his flesh and blood, satellite-phone wielding, ghost: Roohdaar. The
most overdetermined character in the film, every aspect of Roohdaar contributes to his identity
as the analogous Ghost. In his first appearance, halfway through the film, he is dressed entirely
in white, blending into the snow-covered background, and remains slightly out of focus for a
section of the shot thereby appearing both washed out and ephemeral. After diagnosing a man
with the New Disease, Roohdaar denies being a doctor and instead identifies himself as “the soul
of a doctor.” The first syllable of his name (Rooh) translates roughly to spirit or soul, while the
second syllable (Daar) translates roughly to one who owns or possesses. His name identifies him
not as the “soul of a doctor” but rather one who keeps, possesses or even protects the doctor’s
spirit, his essence. Khurram (Claudius) later informs Haider, even this name is part of a “ghost”
identity, an endlessly deferred sign that hints at but never fully represents his character. A double
agent whose repeated switches in allegiance have made it impossible to discover his true
identity, Roohdaar’s untrustworthiness reflects the political vacillations of the film and we, as
viewers, are never certain that we can trust him. Roohdaar, thus, is at once identical to and the
opposite of Doctor Meer whose one allegiance, as we know from the beginning of the film, is to life.

This otherworldly quality that Roohdaar seems to possess is not limited to the external signifiers of identity. It is through the shared experience of imprisonment and torture that he becomes the confidante, the other half, of Hilaal Meer and it is through escaping their shared death that he becomes the “keeper” of his friend’s spirit and the mouthpiece of his wishes.

Unlike the Ghost in *Hamlet* who remains unable to “tell the secrets of [his] prison-house”, in all likelihood a reference to purgatory, Roohdaar explicitly details the conditions of their imprisonment—“a tale whose lightest word/Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,/Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres” (1.5.15-17). The torture undergone in these detention centers often resulted in physical disfigurement and impotence, effects perceived as diminishing to one’s masculinity and humanity.

The camps for disappeared people in *Haider* operate in a state of exception—people accused of militancy or harboring militants are stripped of their constitutional rights. This group of non-citizens are, therefore, *homines sacri*—“life that may be killed without the commission of homicide” (Agamben 159). Described by Mathur as “sometimes incongruously housed in schools, playgrounds, hotels, guesthouses and cinemas, [these] camps are places of fear, controlling not only space, but also bodies” (42). Hilaal Meer is treated in this manner as he loses

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98 These camps are what Giorgio Agamben in his seminal theorization *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* has referred to as the paradigmatic “the state of exception” of the modern state. Agamben describes the concentration camps of Nazi Germany as “the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life without any mediation” (171). He elaborates, in his book, on the distinction drawn by the Greeks between biological life (*zoe*) and political life (*bios*) and the liminal figure in Roman law of the *homo sacer*—the sacred man who could not be sacrificed but could be killed with impunity. For Agamben, it is in the camps, where the normal juridico-political order is suspended, that its inhabitants are reduced to “bare life,” stripped of their constitutional rights as citizens and subjected to the power of the state. This space of exception that is the camp is not separate to the political order or outside of it, but rather provides the foundation for the norm.
his rights to his property, his family and finally his body. However, the last glimpse we get of the imprisoned Hilaal, via Roohdaar’s subjective narration, is one of a politically defiant captive. His refusal to shout Jai Hind (Victory to India) results in him being placed in a separate cell with Roohdaar. While Hilaal’s death is emblematic of the sovereign power of the state—his scheming brother is now an elected government official—Roohdaar survives the encounter, scarred and crippled. His ghostliness lies not merely in his name and wardrobe but also in his physical and psychological losses. In the last interaction between Hilaal and Roohdaar, conveyed from Roohdaar’s subjective perspective, Hilaal asks him whether he is a Shia or a Sunni. Roohdaar responds: “I am the river and the tree. I am the Jhelum and the poplar. I am sacred, I am also forbidden. I am a Shia and a Sunni. I am a Pandit. I always was, I am and I will always be. Who else will relate these true stories for all of eternity?” (Bhardwaj and Peer 122). Roohdaar, then, slots himself into the both-and-neither space of the specter, seemingly outside of and unaffected by the forces of history. By occupying an Archimedean point outside of history, he invests himself with the authority to retell and later manipulate the narrative. Thus, the figure of the Ghost in Shakespeare’s Hamlet is split into two in Bhardwaj’s adaptation: the disappeared doctor and his cellmate, one deprived of his rights and the other seemingly imbued with a supernatural immunity from, and power to influence, history. He commands a universality that nonetheless remains rooted in a vernacular Kashmiri sensibility.

In this proliferation of signifiers of liminal spaces and identities—disappearance, torture camps, ghost identities—is the lived experience of a borderland. Haider’s exploration of the

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both-and-neither space between life and death implicitly reflects both Kashmir’s territorial liminality and its condition of purgatory. However, the closing credits of the film highlight the heroism of the Indian army in evacuating and providing relief to those affected by the floods in Jammu and Kashmir in September 2014. This statement, by undercutting any criticism of the army in the film itself and by slotting the events of the film firmly in the past (though still within living memory) place the Indian state and military firmly in the realm of “life.”

On 5th August 2019, the government formally revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, splitting the former state into two union territories thereby placing the region under central control. This action on the part of the BJP-led government, though ostensibly enacted through legal channels, was accompanied by an unprecedented clampdown on the lives of Kashmiri citizens: in the days preceding this announcement, troops poured into the region while pilgrims and tourists were made to leave, leading to rumblings and rumors of war. On August 5th, in anticipation of widespread protests, curfew was imposed, all phones and internet in the region were shut down—people woke up to a complete blackout with no information about why—and prominent Kashmiri political leaders were placed under house arrest. In the months since, though some services have been restored, the region is still under a communications lockdown that has had a dramatic impact on the economy, education, and health services. In this climate, while some reports of human rights abuses have trickled out, the almost complete blackout on the information and stories leaving the region means that the dominant narrative remains one promulgated by the government. When Haider was released in 2014, during the early days of

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100 Under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, the state of Jammu and Kashmir had a unique degree of autonomy, allowing the region to make its own laws in all matters with the exception of finance, defense, foreign affairs and communications. Significantly, this prevented non-residents from buying property or permanently settling in the region.
the first Modi government, the film, though criticized, was also lauded for its hitherto unseen portrayal of Kashmiri life. Five years later, its vision of Kashmir’s troubled past, when the region was mired in state surveillance, military presence, and militant violence, seems likely to be superseded by today’s reality.

**Conclusion**

Criticism surrounding modern adaptations of Shakespeare, particularly those that have some form of political inflection, often reference this closing couplet of one of Hamlet’s soliloquies: “The play’s the thing/Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.” (2.2.539-40). This notion, that watching a performance can somehow influence or reveal something about its intended audience, has remained a prominent thread in theories of performance and even more so in defining the processes and intentions of adapting or appropriating canonical works. Shakespeare, perhaps more than any other playwright, has been utilized as a Trojan Horse: masking a pointed critique of power or particular political message with the veneer of a known, supposedly antiquated, classic, in situations where oppressive regimes and censorship have made freedom of speech impossible. One almost automatically, therefore, searches for the hidden message in *When Hamlet Came to Mizoram,* *Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata* and *Haider.*

While both *When Hamlet Came to Mizoram* and *Haider* are explicitly set in zones containing an international boundary line, *Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata* is set in the more distinct and smaller zone of a neighborhood on the border of a city. However, though the former two films are explicitly set in zones beset with markers of exclusion and inclusion, the approaches to representations of a borderland are strikingly different. Though Mizoram has a substantial international boundary, the dominant border informing our reception of the film is that of the Inner Line, as Mizoram is repeatedly positioned as a zone set off from the rest of
India. Thus, even though the purported subject of the film—*Hamlet-drama*—is one that is by definition hybrid and multiple, the actual subject of the film—Mizoram—is seen as alien or other, across a particular border. The film aims to make Mizoram more familiar to its audience, but its very positioning is one that presumes an inherent and insuperable difference.

In *Haider*, one might argue that it is the Line of Control that casts a shadow over the film. However, it is through the various images of Indian militarization and militant violence that the film tries to contextualize life in this divided border zone. In the vacillating political ideology of the film and the both-and-neither characteristics of Hilaal Meer and his Ghost, the film attempts to articulate the imprisoning hybrid space of contemporary Kashmir. Garanhata, on the other hand, despite its increased specificity in absolute terms, allows for a reading of the borderland in broader strokes. As a zone that is the most vulnerable, the border—as represented by the neighborhood of Garanhata—functions as a symbol of the nation’s failures, in both its past and its future. *When Hamlet Came to Mizoram*, with its similarly contentious, yet apparently diminished, geo-political context, and *Hemlat the Prince of Garanhata* with its exploration of the metaphorical space of the border on the chronological axis of history, provide entry points to *Haider* as an adaptation that dramatizes the relationship between the nation and its borders.

While both *When Hamlet Came to Mizoram* and *Haider* are set in border states of India that have seen, and continue to witness, period of political turbulence, India remains a very different presence in the representations of these regions—almost completely erased or subsumed in the former and represented almost exclusively by the military in the latter. While *Hemlat* is also set in a border state, it is one whose claims to inclusion in the nation have not been contested to the same degree. West Bengal is therefore set against other regions in India and not against a monolithic whole, while simultaneously retaining a claim to a representative national identity.
My analysis of these desified productions rests precisely on this question: what is the des in these adaptations of Hamlet? The answer varies. India is in the camera’s gaze, India is the antagonistic other, India is the larger whole and the region functions as a synecdoche, India is the homogenous transnational. In Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Norway occupies a strange and complex position relative to Denmark. An enemy in a historical war over land and a theoretical threat in the present, Norway is a fluid signifier in Hamlet, both a foe and a savior, both foreign and intimate, both distant and connected. India, in these three productions, occupies a similar position to the border region, broadly conceived as Denmark. While the analogues to England, France and Germany are more easily identifiable—Wittenburg is Aligarh Muslim University in Haider, France is Mauritius in Hemlat—Norway remains, in all three instances, slippery and difficult to pin down. In this chapter, I argue that it is through moments of absence, censorship, multilingualism, and performance that the border as conceived of by the nation and the nation as conceived of by the border are made manifest.
Chapter 4: “Shakespeare Kamaal Hain!” Piya Behrupiya, Diaspora, and the Idea of Shakespeare

The Globe to Globe festival was a central component of both the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival and the Cultural Olympiad that was part of the lead up to the London 2012 Olympics. The premise of this festival was a simple one: “to do all the plays of Shakespeare, each in a different language, each by a premier company from a different country, all in the same space in just six weeks” (Dromgoole xxiii). An unobtrusive, but salient, addition to the piazza at Shakespeare’s Globe—a wooden pole with thirty-seven different arrows inscribed with the distance each of the companies had travelled—demonstrated the importance of location for the festival, not just in terms of the multiplicity of the points of origin, but the singularity of the point of arrival. The tropes of travel and journeying were a core component in this festival, not just in terms of its premise of bringing theatre from across the globe to a single central location, Shakespeare’s Globe. These companies came from a multitude of different locations, ranging from within the city of London itself to war-torn regions of Afghanistan, through various different routes, and requiring different degrees of paperwork eased by the institutional backing of the Olympics that allowed for a greater freedom of mobility (Bird Interview 2017). Several of the productions were suffused with visual signifiers of movement and migration from beginning by dragging trunks or suitcases filled with props onstage as was the case for the Armenian King John—“an apt recognition, perhaps, of the large proportion of [the] audience, who [had] at some point made the journey from Armenia to settle in the UK”—to the circumlocution of the paradigmatic diasporic Jew in the figure of Shylock at the end of the Hebrew Merchant of Venice (Malone). There were vocal evocations of travel as well, with companies often joking about the distances they had traversed.
One such moment was in Pakistani Theatre Wallay’s colorfully comic, contemporary Urdu *Taming of the Shrew*. An emphasis on physical theatre and tongue-in-cheek negotiations with the fourth wall reached its peak in a stichomythic back-and-forth between Ghazi (Gremio)\(^{101}\) and Mir (Tranio), as they competed for Bina’s (Bianca’s) hand in marriage. They presented a catalogue of assets to her father, and for every item that Ghazi proudly declared, from houses to cars to attire, Mir surpassed him in location, number, and brand: central air-conditioning over large airy rooms, two Mercedes Benzes over a Pajero, three bungalows in Karachi over a property in Lahore. The conclusive comparison, and the one that elicited the loudest response from the audience, was Mir’s declaration that he was a British passport holder as a counter to Ghazi’s proud assertion that he had a five-year multiple-entry visa to the UK. Underlying this laughter was an awareness of the obstacles to travel between Pakistan and the UK, and implicit in the finality of Mir’s declaration of his legal citizenship was the desire for, and value of, an unchecked freedom of movement. This light, comic, and fleeting reference to the politics of location and mobility involved both Ghazi and Mir facing the audience as they delivered their lines, a particularly emphatic move in the shared lighting of Shakespeare’s Globe where actors can address specific members of the audience and gauge their responses. This inside joke brought disparate sections of the audience into a shared moment of understanding, both linguistic—“British passport holder” was in English—and pragmatic, in terms of an awareness of the complex reality that determines who can travel, when, and where.

While these evocations of journeying and travel were in part practical—these companies had to transport their performers, props, sets, and costumes from various parts of the world—it was a thematic strand that suffused the festival on a far more fundamental level. There was a

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\(^{101}\) Where character names have been changed, I place the Shakespearean analogue in parentheses.
sense that this was a homecoming of a Shakespeare dispersed to various corners of the world, returning to a point of origin. This festival, along with other cultural events leading up to the London 2012 Olympics had “Shakespeare [become] a repeated point of focus in the desire to celebrate British creativity and the influence it has subsequently had on the rest of the world” (Sullivan 7). Historical accuracy seemed inconsequential as company after company celebrated the chance to perform where Shakespeare once did, often framing their journey as a pilgrimage of sorts that brought a transformed, mutated but still essentially Shakespearean play back to the place of its inception (Globe to Globe Interviews). This return of a dispersed Shakespeare was simultaneously mirrored in the links that these productions provided London’s diverse diasporic communities to their respective homelands.

A primary objective for Shakespeare’s Globe, was to attract a demographic not usually considered a part of the Globe’s audience base by presenting theatre in some of the major languages of London’s diasporic communities. Thus, it was not only the journeys that these companies had undertaken that were visually and verbally referenced onstage but rather that the references pointed to more complex and diverse dynamics of forced and voluntary migration that characterized the establishment and histories of these various communities. Fourteen of the productions at this festival came from countries that had a direct colonial heritage; four of these fourteen came from the Indian subcontinent: the Urdu Taming of the Shrew, the Bengali Tempest, the Gujarati All’s Well That Ends Well and the Hindi Twelfth Night.

Piya Behrupiya (Beloved Impersonator) premiered as Barwi Raat (literally Twelfth Night) at Shakespeare’s Globe on 27th April 2012, as part of this grand theatrical experiment

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102 Most visible perhaps in Kenneth Branagh’s performance of Caliban’s speech “This isle is full of noises” as part of the opening ceremony of the Olympics which was watched by millions of people around the world.
bringing together theatre companies from around the world to perform the Shakespearean canon in thirty-seven different languages. Reviews of the production, largely by London’s mainstream theatre reviewers familiar with *Twelfth Night*, observed this emphasis on a different sort of Shakespeare though coded it largely as superficial and Bollywood-like while simultaneously bemoaning the loss of an exploration of the play’s melancholic side. Containing eighteen songs, coordinated dances, an unflagging energetic pace, and colorful costumes, the production “transformed Shakespeare’s painful play about grief and the embarrassment of love to a carefree romp” emphasizing the comic elements of the play while sidestepping any engagement with its darker core (Smith 221). *Piya Behrupiya* involves a boisterous, invested, and often bumbling, acting troupe performing *Twelfth Night* in colloquial Hindi verse, frequently interspersed with songs.\(^{103}\) This means that all the performers are onstage throughout, shifting between their roles as members of an acting troupe—shouting out words of encouragement or correction, stopping their ears at Orsino’s off-key lovesick singing, or responding involuntarily to a particularly effective performance—and the specific characters of *Twelfth Night*. Thus, the audiences are at all times aware of the play as performance and are brought along on the journey of the play’s exploration of the very nature of storytelling, with every performance being tailored to its specific audience.

Performed by Mumbai’s The Company Theatre, this Hindi translation of *Twelfth Night* is one that retains all Shakespearean character and place names save one.\(^ {104}\) The analogue to Feste

\(^{103}\) The use of music, songs, and dance in *Twelfth Night* is not in itself unusual. It is something that the play invites and has been frequently utilized in performance. See Schafer.

\(^{104}\) *Twelfth Night* does not enjoy the same popularity on the Indian stage that some of Shakespeare’s other comedies, like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, do. Of the few productions that I have been able to find that have taken place over the past thirty years, there appears, in the ones performed in vernacular languages at least, to be a reliance on folk performance styles, comedy, and farce. These include the 1990 National School of Drama production *Barween Raat* directed by Fritz Bennewitz, the 2002 Madras Players *Twelfth*
in this production is Phool Singh. The most obvious connotation of this choice of name is the play on the homonyms Fool and Phool. Like Feste, *Piya Behrupiya*’s Phool Singh plays the wise fool whose observations and interpretations of the others’ interactions is both comic and incisive. However, the name Phool Singh also references one of the most famous characters of the folk performance style of *nautanki*. This north Indian folk performance tradition relies heavily on song and dance, is frequently associated with lowbrow popular entertainment for the masses, and draws on a diverse array of sources and languages. While there may be alternative etymologies for the name, the popularity of the play *Nauṭaṅkī shāhzādī (Princess Nauṭaṅkī)* and its eponymous character has been credited with giving the performance style of *nautanki* its name.105

The names of the characters, like those of other legendary lovers, Laila and Majnu, Heer and Ranjha, have entered everyday speech—“any beautiful girl dismissing her suitors one after the other is a Nautanki waiting for her Phool Singh” (Gargi 40). Phool Singh, in this play, is the princess’ eventual husband, who devises an ingenious plan involving crossdressing in order to be alone with his beloved:

Phul Singh helped the mālin weave a special garland to present to Nauṭaṅkī, affixing a gem of his own. When the princess saw it, her left eye throbbed, her breast quivered, and she sensed her future husband was near. But she said nothing and demanded that the mālin produce the maker of the unusual wreath. Phul Singh directed the mālin to disguise him as her newlywed daughter-in-law and lead him into court. Decorated in full feminine array, Phul Singh at last beheld his beloved, but he could not speak his heart for fear of revealing himself. Nauṭaṅkī was enchanted by the lovely young girl she saw before her.

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105 Kathryn Hansen has argued that *nautanki*’s absence within the list of “prestigious, officially approved performance genres of modern India” (13) may be a consequence of the “unusual association of a folklore genre with a female character” (16).
Overcome with desire, she decorated her bed with flowers and invited the bride to come lie with her. 106

There are clear parallels between this play and Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night that move beyond the obvious use of crossdressing as a theatrical device, though significantly in Nautanki Shahzadi, it is the man who dresses as a woman for the express purpose of achieving a union with his beloved as opposed to Viola’s crossdressing as a man to hide her identity and protect herself. Both plays contain moments of heightened homoerotic tension that ultimately dissipate through the re-establishment or re-assertion of a heteronormative social order. At the core of both these plays, separated by two centuries and half a world, is a concern with gendered agency in romantic love: how one loves, who one loves, and the means and modes by which this love can be expressed and received.

Piya Behrupiya’s Phool Singh, though played by a woman, Neha Saraf, presents as an androgynous character, seemingly immune to the complicated love triangles, desires, and confusions of the rest of the characters. On the surface, this Phool Singh appears to have little in common with their namesake. Nautanki’s Phool Singh is a lover so determined to win over the princess that he resorts to cross-dressing to gain an audience with her. However, the choice of a name so clearly associated with nautanki is significant in underscoring the connection between this version of Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night and the folk performance style of nautanki. This tip of the hat to nautanki, a minor detail that evokes the performance style, but does not really explore the connotations of that specific choice, is characteristic of Piya Behrupiya’s treatment of its source materials: acknowledging influences while at the same time subverting expectations.

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106 This translation is taken from Kathryn Hansen’s book Grounds for Play: The Nauṭāṅkī Theatre of North India (17). She names her sources as “a composite of verses from Chiranjilal and Natharam, Sāṅgīt Nauṭāṅkī (1904), later known as Sāṅgīt Nauṭāṅkī shāhzādī urf, phūl sính panjābī (e.g., 1975 ed.); Muralidhar, Sāṅgīt Nauṭāṅkī shāhzādī (1909); Govind Ram, Sāṅgīt Nauṭāṅkī (1915)” (308).
by subjecting them to a process of hybridization. The use of the name Phool Singh, one of the performing tradition’s most famous characters, signifies the importance of nautanki, priming us to notice other traces of this influence and providing specific audiences with a framework for understanding what might be an unfamiliar Shakespeare play.

In Piya Behrupiya, the actor playing Sebastian takes on the stock nautanki role of the ranga, “the director-narrator who links episodes, describes the locale, or comments on the action” (Lal Theatres 322). In his first appearance, he helps to guide the audience, providing them at the outset with a synopsis of the ensuing drama: 107

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\begin{align*}
Ek \text{ kahaani laya hoon mein} & \quad \text{I have brought you a tale} \\
Jiska \text{ theme hain pyaar} & \quad \text{Whose theme is love} \\
Aur \text{ pyaar se behtar feeling toh} & \quad \text{And friend, there is no better feeling} \\
Kahi \text{ nahin hain yaar} & \quad \text{than love} \\
Vaise \text{ to yahaan par bhi main role pe} & \quad \text{Here too, the main roles are that} \\
ek \text{ rajaj aur ek rani hain} & \quad \text{of a king and a queen} \\
Leken \text{ dhyan se dekhenge} & \quad \text{But if you look closely} \\
ek \text{ jurwa bhai-behen ki kahaani hain} & \quad \text{you’ll see that it’s the story of twin siblings!}
\end{align*}
\]

From the very outset, therefore, Amitosh Nagpal’s rhymed verse translation incorporates the easy code-mixing omnipresent in today’s spoken Hindi, sprinkling the lines with several English words. This use of an accessible, popular, and familiar vernacular sets the tone for a production that consistently undercuts audience’s expectations of what constitutes a Shakespeare play. In this opening, Nagpal primes the audience to move beyond a superficial reading of the play they are about to see, drawing their attention instead to its hidden core. While this might appear to be a stock narrative of romantic love between members of the nobility, we are informed, both through content and form, what he is saying and how he is saying it, that this

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107 This and all following transcriptions and translations are my own.
story has more to do with the quotidian and the commonplace—the tale of two siblings told through the medium of everyday speech.

It is perhaps this quality of the production that ensures it enjoys unprecedented popularity, both within India and abroad, eight years and hundreds of shows after its premiere. Understanding, exploring, and analyzing this success, particularly when viewed alongside other contributions to the Globe to Globe festival, is the driving impulse of this chapter. What does this Indian contribution to an international festival celebrating Shakespeare have to say about the country’s ambivalent relationship with the bard? What does it reveal about the circuits and media through which theatre travels? What role do language, national identity, and the politics of location play in the play’s inception and reception? How is the play comparatively received within the country and abroad, by a domestic audience and a foreign or diasporic one?

In this chapter, I focus on a production distinct from the others both in terms of its genre and in terms of its intended audience, expanding outwards from the nation to a more global perspective, considering a desified Shakespeare adaptation both on an international stage and alongside other iterations of Shakespeare from different countries. I argue that Piya Behrupiya, unlike the other South Asian productions at the festival, complicates the established association between language and national identity by foregrounding a pluralist approach to the desification of Shakespeare. In considering what happens when desified Shakespeare travels, I demonstrate that the emphasis put on the idea of Shakespeare and on the idea of India varies depending on location, context, medium, and audience. This project, as a whole, suggests that desified Shakespeare productions provide a productive pool of material for exploring the continued and contingent construction of the nation; this chapter brings the context, concerns, and condition of diaspora to bear on this construction. Piya Behrupiya, conceived of for a festival that grappled
with the competing frameworks of nationalism, internationalism and diaspora, despite the broad absence of expected markers of national identity, in its various iterations engages with the different modes of performing and adapting both Shakespeare and India on the contemporary international stage.

**Language and National Identity: The South Asian Productions at the Festival**

The process by which the festival organizers chose and paired the languages and plays ranged from simple, easy, and quick, to a fairly complicated back-and-forth, as they aimed to procure productions that fit one or both of their two criteria. First, that it was in a “London language,” i.e. one “readily heard and used by what was likely to comprise the audience base attending the bulk of the performances: Londoners” and second, a language that had a long tradition of performing Shakespeare (Kenny 33). Despite the long history of Shakespeare performances in the subcontinent, the four South Asian languages were all deliberately chosen to appeal to diasporic communities. Hindi was picked because of its characterization as a lingua franca across a large swathe of the subcontinent; it seemed to the organizers of the festival the language that most members of the South Asian diaspora would be most likely to understand (Bird Interview 2017). Bengali was an obvious choice because of the proximity of Tower Hamlets, an east London borough with one of the highest concentrations of Bangladeshis in the country. While the organizers had wanted a show from Pakistan, it was Punjabi that had been their first choice of language, one that did not work out for a variety of reasons, and they eventually settled on Urdu. On the other hand, Malayalam—having already been featured at the Globe before—and Marathi—as not having very many diasporic speakers—were both vetoed in favor of Gujarati, a language that had a strong presence in its diasporic community across the UK (Bird Interview 2017).
The four productions, from three different countries, would likely have appealed to, and been accessible to, audiences from across the South Asian diaspora in London, and not limited to those from within a particular national community. The South Asian diasporic community, largely consisting of people of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi origin, form some of the largest groups of ethnic minorities in London and, in 2012, totaled approximately 13% of the city’s population (UK Census). These diasporic communities, despite different histories and internal diversity, continue to have a determinative relationship with the nation(s) of the Indian subcontinent, both real and imagined. The South Asian diaspora is an exemplary model of a “complex diaspora” a category that actively resists a neat unidirectional and originary link between the nation-state and its diaspora. This is a product of “the fact that similar cultural preoccupations, tastes, cuisines, music, sport, poetry, fashion and popular cinema are widely enjoyed across vast geographical regions encompassing several post-colonial nation states in a globalizing world” (Werbner 75). This shared “rich material culture of consumption” results in shared “public arenas and economic channels for cooperation and communal enjoyment” which move beyond national or religious allegiances (Werbner 76).

While this complex or segmented diaspora comprises multiple nations, religions and languages, it also shares this broader culture, resulting in common cultural referents—a shared identity that unites an internally diverse group together as part of an ethnic minority in the hostland. Thus, as Werbner points out, diaspora is both “ethnic-parochial and cosmopolitan” (emphasis in the original 75). It relies on the notion of an identity that is tied to a particular community—national, ethnic or regional—that is very often bound by geographical location. Simultaneously, however, the existence of diasporic communities requires a multicultural, and cosmopolitan, environment. It is important to bring this concept of complex diaspora to bear on
the objectives and context of the Globe to Globe festival, especially when trying to gauge how these productions were conceived of and received. The other three South Asian productions provide a counterpoint to *Piya Behrupiya* both because they catered broadly to the same complex diaspora, and because they each took a different approach, both to the process of translating and adapting Shakespeare and to the means by which they appealed, directly or indirectly, to diasporic audiences and a corresponding national identity.

Each of these companies, like the others participating in the festival, received an identical brief. They were each assigned a Shakespeare play to perform in translation with minimal to no use of English. They had to provide their own, basic, sets, and adapt to the playing conditions at the Globe, which meant using minimum recorded sound and fairly limited modern lighting. While some of the productions had existed prior to the festival, all four of the South Asian contributions were commissioned for the Globe to Globe though they also completed a run before or after in their respective countries. The Gujarati *All’s Well That Ends Well* adapted the Shakespearean comedy to the very particular context of a Gujarati mercantile family at the turn of the twentieth century, incorporating both the speech and dress of that period, in an approximation of the *bhangwadi* style of performance.108 The Bengali *Tempest*, in the language and style of the performance, engaged with Bangladesh’s turbulent political history and natural environment, choosing to showcase, instead of a specific Bangladeshi context, the traditional performance styles of Manipuri *natapala* and *panchali*.109 The Urdu *Taming of the Shrew*, by

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108 A form of popular urban musical theatre that catered to the daily wage laborers of Mumbai in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many of whom worked in the opium industry. (*Bhang* is the Hindi word for opium).

109 The Manipuris are an ethnic group that comprise the majority of the population of the northeastern Indian state of Manipur and are an ethnic minority in Bangladesh. *Natapala* is derivative of *nata sankirtana*, “a devotional ensemble performance held on ritual occasions in the Meitei society of Manipur” (*Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*). It involves singing, dancing, and
contrast, adapted the play to a broadly naturalistic setting, that of a wealthy family in contemporary Lahore. *Piya Behrupiya*, the Hindi *Twelfth Night*, shared several characteristics with these other productions from the subcontinent, most prominently in their reliance on live music, song, and dance, the incorporation of folk or traditional styles of performance, and an emphasis on bright, colorful costumes and sets. Where it stood in marked contrast was in its deliberate flouting of the Globe’s “No English” rule, its canny use of language, and its sustained engagement with the idea of Shakespeare.

The festival director, Tom Bird, made it clear that the Globe to Globe was never meant to be a celebration of nations, explicitly stating, in an attempt to move away from nationalistic fervor, that it was, instead, a celebration of languages and cultures (Bird Interview 2012). However, the definition of what constituted a language, a dialect, and a culture, and the relationship of all three to a national identity varied, demonstrating the untenability of a separation between language and nationality, the impossibility of disavowing the latter to celebrate the former. Several of the productions at the festival emphasized their national identity and this extended to members of the audience who tried to bring flags into the theatre to cheer on their respective countries, mimicking the performance of a ritual more commonly found in international sporting events (Show Reports). It was clear that the performers who participated in the festival saw themselves as national representatives on a globally recognized stage—no different from the athletes that would follow them a few weeks later.

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drumming that is accompanied by jumps and acrobatic turns. *Sankirtana* is generally associated with the Vaishnavite Hindu movement of the eighteenth century. For Nasiruddin Yousuff, the director of the Bengali *Tempest*, the use of Manipuri *natapala* along with the Bengali folk narrative form of *panchali* was a means of drawing on the rich and varied theatre traditions of the subcontinent and not succumbing to the style of Western imitation.
Most significantly, for the purposes of this chapter, both the Bengali *Tempest* and the Urdu *Taming of the Shrew* explicitly called attention to their national origins. Dhaka Theatre’s *Tempest* was suffused with a sense of national pride, the audience roaring in delight at the end when one of the actors ran on stage with a Bangladeshi flag during the curtain call, while Rubol Noor Lodi, who played Prospero, stood in the center of the stage and shouted out thrice, “We are from Bangladesh!” This declaration clearly points to the assertion of an identity rooted in place of origin but is also one that marks a journey—we are from Bangladesh and we have arrived; we are here. The presence of the flag onstage was not solely a symbol of the nation but was also a performative act of ownership, as they claimed a piece of one of the world’s most recognizable playing spaces. For a moment that evening, the stage at Shakespeare’s Globe and the

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*Figure 31 The Bangladeshi Flag on the Globe Stage*
coterminous magical island was Bangladesh. The country’s presence, its vitality, and its relationship with contemporary Britain, in the persons of the London Bangladeshi community, who came out in droves, could not be ignored.

The Urdu Taming of the Shrew similarly framed its performance by playing the national anthem at the beginning. Salman Shahid, who played the beleaguered father Mian Basheer, introduced the performance in English, acknowledging how honored they were to be performing in a “sacred space for actors from anywhere in the world” and announcing that the play would be performed in Urdu, “the national language of Pakistan,” an announcement that was met with a loud cheer from the large South Asian contingent in the audience. He then went on to address the “English white folk” in the audience for whom these introductory comments would be some of the “few good moments” they would have and that there would be “hard times” ahead. For their first performance on 25th May 2012, Shahid also went on to state: “These are our musicians and they will simply play the national anthem before we begin. Of Pakistan, unfortunately not of Britain or England. And don’t think this is a takeover, it’s not a takeover, it’s a comedy show.”

Throughout this impromptu introduction, therefore, there was a simultaneous reiteration of the production’s national origins and an acknowledgement of a reversal in a conventional or assumed hierarchy of comprehension in Anglophone theatre. We are reminded not that those who do not speak Urdu will have a hard time, but rather that it is English speakers who will struggle. Thus, the introduction was not necessarily subverting expectations for this particular show, which had been clearly advertised as an Urdu (and Pakistani) version of Taming of the Shrew but was, instead, playing on the fact that the show itself, and the festival at large, subverted conventional expectations of Anglophone Shakespearean theatre.
This light and comic introduction was followed by the solemnity of the national anthem, played by musicians sitting in the corner of an otherwise empty stage. This served to draw the audience’s attention to the painted backdrop of a Lahore street during the spring kite-flying festival, a backdrop that also contained a prominent white crescent and star on a green background—the flag of Pakistan. Members of the audience seated in the galleries, dominated by those of South Asian descent, stood up as the anthem was played. This was followed by thunderous applause and a short moment of silence before the actors gathered onstage and the actual play got underway. Once again, this ritual performance of national pride and allegiance along with the fact that the production was sponsored by different branches of the Pakistani government, as well as the director Haissam Hussain’s assertion in a post-performance interview that this was a prestigious opportunity to “represent Pakistan,” brings the framing device of the nation to the forefront.
In both cases, the languages of these productions are not exclusively spoken in their respective countries—both Urdu and Bengali are recognized as scheduled languages in India. However, for both Pakistan and Bangladesh, their national languages were an essential element in their struggle for their independence and, as a consequence, a defining feature of national identity. For Pakistan, the association of Urdu with Islam and its corresponding (and continuing) demonization by members of the Hindu Right in India was one of the factors that led to the demand for a separate Muslim State. For Bangladesh, the 1971 War of Independence was the culmination of the struggle of East Pakistanis/Bangladeshis to have their language and culture officially recognized and given its due.

The Bengali analogue to Caliban’s famous accusation—“You taught me language, and my profit on’t/ Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language!” (1.2.362–4) provides a glimpse into the subcontinent’s complex history of the negotiations between language and power:

You have really exaggerated  
You and I both know the truth  
Whatever you taught me has been by your own practice  
And your decree  
You carried away my language  
And what you taught me of yours  
Was also your choice.  
What value do you place on my language?  
The mother’s language, the mother’s speech,  
That which we call the mother tongue  
That was the language you carried away.  
Don’t you know the results are disastrous?  
You are obsessed with color,  
I am black, yours is light.  
But that which flows through our veins  
What is its color? What is its appearance?  
It’s a single color—red!
Fool, is yours blue?^{110}

In speaking of the impunity with which Prospero deprives him of his language, his roots, and his identity, and the relentless belief in an inherent superiority that drives these actions, Caliban delivers a pointed commentary on Bangladesh’s political history. The almost cannibalistic dominance of one language over another may be read in terms of the imposition of English during British colonial rule, the imposition of Urdu during the years Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan, and can even be extended to the contemporary situation in Bangladesh where standard Bengali dominates the linguistic environment, overshadowing tribal languages and dialects. Considering the Indian contributions to the Globe to Globe festival alongside those of

![Figure 33 Caliban: "That was the language you carried away."](image)

^{110} Besh bariye bolle kintu/ Shotto she amio jani tumio jaano/ Ja shikhiyechho sheto tomar reeti/ Tomar-iaaadesh/ Amar bhasha kere nile,/ Tomar bhasha ja shikhale/ she-o tomar nirdesh/ Tomar kacche amar bhashar ki daam acche?/ Maa-er bhasha, Maa’er buli,/ Matribbasha jake boli/ Shei bhashake kere nile/ jano kina, porinotti bhalo noi/ Borno niye dando tomar/ Ami kalo, dhobol tomar/ Shirai shirai bohe je dhara,/ ki rong tar, ki chehara?/ She rong ektai—lal./ Nirbodh, tomar a ki neel? (my translation).
Pakistan and Bangladesh underscores the significance of language and religion, which continue to be lenses through which the overarching narrative of the des is configured.

Given the fact that these productions catered to a larger swathe of the South Asian complex diaspora brings to the forefront the inherent instability of the construction of the Indian nation, the need to define it in contrast to the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh in order to make sense of its fragmentary nature. This is not to say that the Indian productions deliberately set out to eliminate national identity, or rather the explicit acknowledgement of, or reference to, being a national representative on a global stage. Rather, this absence speaks to the ways in which the nation is differently conceived. While this may have been the result of there being two productions from the same country, it also speaks to the limitations of mapping language onto nation in a polyglot country like India. The constitution of India recognizes twenty-two scheduled languages, which include Gujarati, Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu. Notwithstanding popular perception, however, the country has no national language, despite repeated and ongoing campaigns to award Hindi that label. While the festival’s choice of Hindi as a lingua franca may have led to a flattening of India’s soundscape, Piya Behrupiya’s director, Atul Kumar, in drawing on the varied linguistic and regional backgrounds of his diverse cast produced a far more realistic depiction of contemporary India’s soundscape (Kumar Interview).

Equally, the deliberate and repeated flouting of the Globe’s “No English” rule served to reinforce not just the “fact that the British don’t own the playwright because he was born and lived here” but also that they do not have monopoly over the language either (Bird Interview 2012).

At the other end of the spectrum was Aparna Theatre’s Gujarati All’s Well That Ends Well111 which catered to the relatively homogenous and discrete unit of the Gujarati diasporic

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111 The Gujarati title is Maro Piyu Gayo Rangoon (My Beloved Has Gone to Rangoon).
community by dramatizing a significant period in their diasporization at the turn of the twentieth century. The opium trade of the nineteenth century, largely a monopoly of the British, permitted a small section of the Indian mercantile class to participate and expand their markets on an international scale. This forging of new trading links led to a lot of migration in this period, and it is this journey that is represented by the figure of Bharatram (Bertram) whose greatest ambition is to see the world beyond the confines of his small village—to go to Bombay, and then, abroad (Shanbag Interview). Bharatram’s desire to leave home, his encounter with the exotic Alkini in Burma, and his subsequent return to his wife Heli (Helena) and family in India, and the happy resolution that accompanies this, dramatize the competing demands of home and wanderlust, departure and return, determined by traditional gender roles. While Heli pulls him back home to his duties, Parbat (Parolles) encourages him to enjoy the pleasures life abroad brings. This pull of the exotic and the unknown also clearly mapped onto the binary between the traditions of India and the temptations of the West. As Bharatram grew physically, and emotionally, distant from his family, his clothing became “increasingly and symbolically Anglicized (acquiring a tie, waistcoat, suit jacket, watch chain and replacing slippers with shoes)” (Olive 35).

There was, however, no use of the English language in this production. Aparna Theatre remained strictly within the language parameters laid out by the Globe and it was evident by the audible responses of the substantial Gujarati population in the audience that there was a lot being lost in not having access to the language. In fact, several of the rave reviews of this production make a point of highlighting their envy of those who could understand everything. For the director, Sunil Shanbag, who describes his style as “textual theatre,” it was exceedingly important to have people in the audience who spoke the language, to help guide those who did
not by their reactions (Interview). This was a production that relied heavily on the script of Mihir Buhta’s translation, the language and its nuances aimed to deliver a sense of the Gujarati spoken over a century ago, making it hard even for native speakers to fully grasp its meaning. The Gujarati diasporic community came from all over the country to attend this production and as Satchit Puranik, who played Parbat, mentioned in a post-performance interview, it appeared as though these audience members had a better grasp of the dated language than the audiences back home in Bombay. This was likely because they were descendants of Gujaratis who had migrated in that period and were watching a slice of their ethno-national history being enacted onstage (Shanbag Interview).

Piya Behrupiya, on the other hand, eschewed any sort of linguistic purity. Conceived of, rehearsed, and translated simultaneously in a residency, the evolving script was improvised by members of the cast and incorporated the languages, songs, and jokes of their regions (Kumar Interview). This move also drew on the linguistic hybridity present in nautandi dramas, which often consist of a mixture of “Braj, Rajasthani, Hindi and local dialects” (Gargi 43). Andrew Aguecheek, Olivia’s foolish but wealthy suitor, was originally played by Mantra Mugdh, a Bengali. He marked his entrance by singing the Bengali Baul song Jibon Nadir Kule Kule Mon (My Mind Resides on the Banks of this Life-River) and was referred to throughout the production as Andrew Dada, a Bengali honorific. Olivia, played by Punjabi Mansi Multani, incorporated in her speech Punjabi endearments, diminutives, and pronouns. Orsino, played by Maharashtrian Sagar Deshmukh, spoke Bambaiyya (Bombay) Hindi, occasionally lapsing into Marathi.

The two Indian productions at the festival, therefore, responded in diametrically different ways to the brief provided by the Globe, though with a similar effect in terms of deemphasizing a
homogenous link between language and nationality. By focusing on a specific linguistic community within India’s polyglot landscape, Aparna Theatre’s production made clear that, despite the references to broader national and global concerns of the early twentieth century, theirs was a story of a specific community. *Piya Behrupiya*, on the other hand, embraced the qualification of an Indian or desi production by incorporating references to a diverse, though not comprehensive, range of Indian languages. Despite the dominance of Hindi, the code-mixing that was characteristic of this production suggested the impossibility of linguistic purity and rigid language borders in contemporary India.

Though the Globe had placed an emphasis on the diversity of languages at the festival, their brief requiring translations of these plays, the productions themselves often morphed into adaptations. The shows frequently skirted and/or questioned the boundary between translation and adaptation; this slippage was further compounded by the emphasis placed on non-linguistic modes of transformation in the reviews of these productions that saw the performers as relying “heavily on movement, gesture and facial expressions to deliver their characters’ lines” (Kenny 31). Theatre reviews and scholarly articles were almost exclusively written by mainstream reviewers and academics and, as such, premised their analysis on a fidelity critique focusing on the play’s adherence (or lack thereof) to the Shakespearean text, often in comparison with other recent iterations of the same play in the UK. Therefore, despite the fact that this festival was premised on linguistic diversity, popular and scholarly reviewers tended to sidestep or ignore the issue of translation as understood in its most conventional sense, as the transformation of a text from one language to another, approaching the productions exclusively through the lens of a monolingual Anglophone audience member. In her essay on the role of language in the Globe to Globe festival, Amy Kenny reads the use of English in the Hindi *Twelfth Night* as “comic effect”
(35). However, unlike other productions in the festival that retained lines of English to throw out as little treats to the largely Anglophone audience, always eliciting the, at times uneasy, laughter of recognition, the use of English in this production was far more purposeful—though it often resulted in the very same response. While English was used prominently in Piya Behrupiya, it joined a host of regional languages in belying the nature of this production as a monolingual one, demonstrating instead the porosity of the boundaries between these languages as characters inserted endearments, curses, and idioms into their “Hindi” dialogue.

While other productions, like the Gujarati All’s Well That Ends Well remain closer to a conventional adaptation—changing character and place names and utilizing a culturally specific context—though a process of domestication that imagines a target Gujarati audience, Piya Behrupiya retains, in its performance, an awareness of its ontological status as a translation. For one thing, almost all character names remain unchanged and there are no clear signifiers that help us locate Illyria with any sort of specificity. Second, because of the play-within-a-play structure, the characters are “thinly sketched” and “give the feel of a revue” (Dutt). As a consequence of the lack of a suspension of disbelief, there is more of a sense that they are dealing with a determinative text, albeit an unstable one, that each performance is clearly a re-enactment, one in a series of several. This is perhaps most evident in the figure of Sebastian, played by Amitosh Nagpal, the play’s translator. He appears between acts ostensibly as the narrator or ranga but repeatedly reverts to his role as aggrieved actor—provided with the smallest part in the play—and undervalued translator. On the one hand, he takes on the role of storyteller, mediating between the complicated plot of cross dressing and overlapping love triangles, given a further touch of comedy because of Hindi’s gendered conjugations. He thus literally performs the act of translation onstage. He also slips between his roles as narrator,
translator, ignored actor, Sebastian, and Antonio, determined to make the most of every moment permitted onstage. At one point, he describes Shakespeare as a playwright who fell asleep writing *Twelfth Night*, forgetting the role of Sebastian, who, though central to the play’s denouement, could otherwise have been replaced by a photograph. The most pointed and significant departure from Shakespeare’s play, however, was in Nagpal’s comparison of his own creative work of translation with the dominant cultural capital of Shakespeare, in the form of an almost therapeutic outpouring of his “personal feelings” to the audience:

*My director took me as an actor*
*But I have translated this play from English to Hindi*

*Ye translation ki job ma kasam se* (I swear, my friend.)
*tini thankless job hain yaar* (translation is such a thankless job)
*Main aake line-e sunare hoon aur vo keh raha hain:* (They listen to my lines and say)
*Va Shakespeare kamaal hain* (Wow, Shakespeare is great.)
**Thee, thee, thou, thou karte karte** (Saying thee thee thou thou)
*Aap to Shakespeare dekhne aye hain* (But you have come to see Shakespeare.)

On the one hand, this is a patently funny speech—the mockery of stereotypical Shakespearean dialogue—but, on the other, it serves to underscore, in a manner comprehensible to the majority of the audience, the oft-forgotten contribution of translation. In not performing the expected shifts of cultural context associated with adaptation, *Piya Behrupiya* clings to its identity as a translation, something that director Atul Kumar has repeatedly echoed in interviews: “We believe in translations more than adaptations actually. It keeps the basic flavour of the play alive without corrupting it, unless of course it is an outright devised work ‘based’ on the original” (quoted in Vincent). However, because it did not subscribe to contemporary interpretations of *Twelfth Night* which read the play not as a comedy but “as a comedy about to collapse into tragedy” (Schafer 1), it was viewed by reviewers as a fairly superficial, colorful, and entertaining adaptation of the play that did not engage in any productive sense with the issues of class, gender, and sexuality that are at its core.
Part of the lack of clarity regarding these terms, translation and adaptation, is the question of how important these labels are for gauging the work that these plays are doing. In attempting to slot these productions into one of these rigidly defined categories, we run the risk of overlooking this work. The emphasis placed, for instance, on the experience of the monolingual Anglophone audience member ignores the possibility of interpretation, intervention, invention, fidelity, or critique being located in the language of the performance, despite the fact that for many of these performances there were a substantial number of native speakers in the audience for whom the language of the performance was an integral part of their experience.

Though the audience at the Globe, due to its dual identity as a working theatre and tourist site, often comprises a fair number of tourists, much to the consternation of reviewers who feel they fail “to assume the decorum of theatregoing,” the unusual composition during the festival had a marked effect on the way in which these performances were received (Worthen 108). This shift in the composition of the audience at the Globe to a mixed native-foreign-diasporic audience, though recognized and acknowledged by reviewers, was never fully taken into consideration as complicating our understanding of the reception of these productions. Equally, in catering to some of the prominent diasporic communities of London, many of which have a continued investment in their homelands, the festival underscored a connection with the nation and nationalism, rather than enforcing a separation between the nation and its cultural products. For instance, long-distance nationalism flourishes in the South Asian diasporic community where movements like Hindu nationalism “[utilize] the rhetoric of diaspora in order to mobilize an extensive network of donors. . . funnelling tremendous amounts of funds and other resources to various Hindu nationalist groups in India” (Gopinath 315). In other words, these productions often appealed to their intended diasporic audiences because they came from the homeland rather
than solely because they were in a familiar language or incorporated elements of a familiar culture.

What sets the Globe apart, in the context of contemporary conventions of theatregoing, and has been the subject of several projects pertaining to the Globe as a reconstruction of an Elizabethan playhouse, has been the unusual position occupied by the audience. Particularly for performances that take place during the day, the members of the audience and the performers are equally visible under shared lighting. This visibility has resulted in more active, engaged, and responsive audiences as well as ones that are more easily distracted by the elements, fellow audience members, traffic and, of course, the discomfort of standing for three hours. Members of the audience can more easily gauge the affect of their fellows while performers can, in this paradoxically public and intimate space, play to a single person and incorporate a visible and responsive entity into their performance rather than relegating it to the dark abyss of the dimmed-light proscenium theatre.

For the Globe to Globe festival, the audiences took on an added importance. Shakespeare’s Globe actively and successfully courted new audiences—data shows that over 75% of the attendees at the festival were first-time Globe visitors (Bird Interview 2017). Therefore, the stereotypical Anglophone bardophile was perhaps less likely to be the norm at the festival than the reviewers assumed. For productions which had a large population of native speakers in the city, as was the case for the South Asian productions, the Globe actively reached out to these communities, conducting outreach programs on the ground, utilizing mailing lists

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from other theatres that catered specifically to this population, and approaching students of the
language in the city (Bird Interview 2017). Occasionally this outreach extended beyond the city
with some groups traveling to London from other parts of the UK to watch the play in question.
These efforts meant that, to varying degrees, there were a certain number of native speakers\textsuperscript{113} in
the audience and it was the gap between their understanding of the production and the
interpretations arrived at by those who had no access to the language that became a central thread
of this festival, perhaps most evident when it came to jokes.

The performances at the Globe to Globe festival thus negotiated between the two
approaches of “domestication” and “foreignization”—terms central to translation studies where
the former refers to a strategy by which a source text is rendered more familiar to its target reader
while the latter refers to the strategy by which the translated text retains a sense of strangeness or
otherness. If we consider the target audience for these performances to be a British Anglophone
audience, as many of the reviewers did, then the foreign languages coupled with a lack of line-
by-line surtitles certainly rendered Shakespeare as less familiar, as foreign. However,
presupposing a homogenous British Anglophone audience is at odds with the reality in which
audiences were both mixed and multilingual.

Thus, the mixed native-foreign-diasporic audiences at the Globe to Globe festival provide
us with a microcosm of a diaspora space—a compelling concept, first formulated by Avtar Brah,
that considers both diasporans and natives in terms of their intertwined inhabitation of a shared
space. For Brah, “[d]iaspora space is the point at which the boundaries of inclusion and
exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are contested . . . the site where the

\textsuperscript{113} I’m using this term very broadly to refer to speakers of the language, rather than implying a certain
level of required fluency.
Unlike the concept of diaspora, diaspora space “includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put” (178). In considering not just migrant and ethnic communities in the hostland, but rather the relationality between these groups and those that would be considered part of the mainstream, normative, national, and indigenous, Brah draws our attention to the fact that this space is not exclusively shaped, defined, or occupied by those that would identify as diasporan. In the following section, I apply Avtar Brah’s theorization of the diaspora space to the performative space of Shakespeare’s Globe as a framework for considering the contributions to the festival, and Piya Behrupiya in particular, as embodying a shifting and changeable model of diasporic theatre.

**Space, Place, and Diaspora at Shakespeare’s Globe**

In his essay on regional British Asian drama, Graham Ley makes a case for the necessity of examining the “relationship between ‘space’ and spaces, between ‘location’ and place, juxtaposing the theoretical to the material” (218). He suggests that one of the ways to go about this juxtaposition of the theories and politics of space and location so central to diaspora studies with the material reality of contemporary British Asian theatre is to “consider the spaces actually used by British Asian theatre companies” (218). The actual space used by these traveling theatre companies, the modern reconstruction of an Elizabethan playhouse is one that is saturated with meaning. A theatrical experiment, the Globe claims to provide a unique and originary setting for Shakespeare’s plays—the environment where they were meant to be performed. It is a building that has always comprised of paradoxes. It both depicts the greatest attention to historical accuracy and complies with contemporary building codes; it is a space located as close as legally and practically possible to the original Globe theatre but a project that was the culmination of
efforts and contributions from around the world; performance in this space, therefore, works “at
the intersection between the early modern experience of theatre it labors to restore, and the
postmodern regimes of theatrical performance and of history-performance that are its means of
production” (Worthen Force 83).

As a theatre, therefore, Shakespeare’s Globe displays the characteristics of both a space
and a place. The former is abstract, imagined, and metaphorized, carries with it connotations of
emptiness and vacuum, and is largely conceived in terms of its spatial reality and physical
parameters. A space, thus, can be occupied and shaped or transformed by its occupants. A place
on the other hand, has an identity, is a fixed location in space. In contrast, space has “none of the
univocity or stability of a ‘proper’” (De Certeau 117). These two concepts are not mutually
exclusive, nor does one inherently precede the other. Instead, they exist in dialogic relation.
Shakespeare’s Globe presents an open, malleable space that, nonetheless, imposes certain
boundaries on those who seek to shape it through performance. It is simultaneously a place—
clearly and definitely positioned in a mythic physical location, though it also possesses as a
consequence of this romanticized myth of origins, a transhistorical quality. What it most often
markets itself as is “a mediated experience of the past in the present” (Worthen Force 96) and
performing or viewing a performance at the Globe results in a feeling, as described by a Piya
Behrupiya cast member, of being transported through time or, rather, the uncanny feeling of
being somehow in two places, spaces, and times at once (D’Souza Interview). Though the unique
acoustics and open roof mean that the soundscape of contemporary London filters through, the
Globe is nonetheless a contained space whose composition and configuration shifts with every
performance.
Contained, enveloped, and situated by the premise of the festival, the audiences helped shape the experience of the performances—from those who came to cheer on a national contribution to those bardophiles who painstakingly tried to identify treasured lines and moments in a foreign tongue by following along on their devices (Show Reports). The combination of these drastically different experiences of the same productions (were they going to watch a Shakespeare play or a Hindi play, and how did these expectations shape the experience of watching the play?) can perhaps be probed further by employing Brah’s theorization, which “marks the intersectionality of contemporary conditions of transmigrancy of people, capital, commodities and culture” (238). She describes diaspora space as a “site of immanence,” one where identities are contested, constructed, and appropriated, where the impact of different forms of transgression is experienced. This space is both contained and dynamic and the discrete and ephemeral performances at the Globe provide a productive site for the realization of Brah’s theories.

What becomes apparent in considering Shakespeare’s Globe as a diaspora space during the Globe to Globe festival is the degree to which active and engaged audience members helped shape the experience for non-native speakers. Foreign language productions at Shakespeare’s Globe reverse the normative perspective on access to and comprehension of a Shakespeare play. Paradoxically, full comprehension of these interpretations of Shakespeare were available exclusively to speakers of the language, i.e. the portion of the audience which comprised largely of members of the diaspora. Audience responses to moments in the play that relied on linguistic knowledge helped guide those without access, often in the form of a collective response of gasps or laughter. Conversations before, during, and after productions amongst those with different degrees of familiarity with the production, the play or the language, whispered plot points,
explanations, and clarifications, heated debates on interpretation all added layers to the audience’s experience of the play. Piya Behrupiya frequently performed these acts of clarification within the play itself: translating lines into English or untangling complicated plot points.

While the Globe transformed every day into a different space, inhabited by different people, the productions also constructed and represented different places on stage. Una Chaudhuri in her book *Staging Place* suggests that the “meaning of a place has given [the twentieth] century its theatre” (3). She argues that “[b]elonging and related concepts, such as privacy, inclusion, participation occupy the ideological heart of modern drama, which is above all else a drama about place, and, more specifically, about place as understood through, around, and beyond the figure of home” (27). These productions at the Globe negotiated between the creation and maintenance of the Globe as a diaspora space and the creation and maintenance of a recognizable place (broadly defined) on the Globe stage. For members of the diaspora in the audience, these places depicted onstage participated in this fashioning of the figure of home, playing on the pleasure of recognition that underpins the bond of nostalgia central to the theorization of diaspora—“a homing desire which is not the same thing as a desire for a homeland” (Brah 177). As Chaudhuri has pointed out, “national and ethnic identities are often derived from or directed toward a geography, that there is a location of identity based on race, nation, ethnicity, language—in short, all the elements that together or in part designate the notion of a culture” (3). It is this feature of drama, its ability to include a vast variety of places that sets theatrical performance apart as a unique medium for representing the lived experience of diaspora.
As national and ethnic identities derive from a politics of location or a certain situatedness, the Globe to Globe festival, marketed as one that celebrated the multiplicity of identity also, correspondingly, dealt with a multiplicity of place as understood on axes of distance and difference. Productions moved between performing in the concrete, historically saturated locale of the Globe, and performing an imagined and recognizable—through shared cultural codes—locale to its audience. The Gujarati *All’s Well that Ends Well* deals with the central diasporic tropes of journeying, departure, and return, moving in widening circles from a village in Gujarat to the metropolis of Bombay to the international port of Rangoon, each place signified by minimal props. The Urdu *Taming of the Shrew* had as its backdrop the streets of Lahore, while the Bengali *Tempest*, its colorful set design evocative of the street art of Dhaka, fashioned itself as a national allegory, evoking the setting of a marshy island dominated by the cyclical weather of storms and flooding. All of these productions appear to more obviously lend themselves to analysis via the lens of diaspora studies, when we consider the emphasis that they place on location. *Piya Behrupiya*, on the other hand, lacks an explicitly outlined Indian context, has no markers or links to a normative homogenous national identity, nor does it patently seek to dramatize the diasporic experience. The pleasure of recognition for a diasporan audience member is therefore limited to the performance style, songs, and dialogue—this sounds like home. It has, however, out of all these productions had the greatest global success, starting with one of the few sold out shows at the festival and later traveling to a variety of locations from the United States to Dubai to Australia, as well as all over India.

I argue that what has given this production its lasting and broad appeal is the fact that it is not geographically rooted. It does not seek to represent a particular known place but is rather set in the imaginary village of Illyria, somewhere in India. At its core is the experience of
dislocation—Illyria, for Viola and Sebastian, is an unfamiliar land—a trope that deals more explicitly with the lived experience of diaspora than with the nostalgic appeal of the nation. It is also, correspondingly, extremely adaptable, easily incorporating local references and jokes. *Piya Behrupiya* owes its popularity, in part, to the balance it achieves between universality and particularity. I suggest that it is diasporic theatre because it can and does travel, it is diasporic theatre not because it stands in for the nation, coterminous with a physical border and geographical location, but rather because, like the diaspora, it is understood in terms of the very absence of a link to the physical geography of the nation.

Naming *Piya Behrupiya* and the other South Asian contributions to the festival as diasporic theatre raises the issue of definitions in what is a niche and interdisciplinary field. In the introduction to a collection of South Asian diasporic drama, Neilesh Bose presents the questions that undergird this issue of definition in trying “to determine what makes a play a part of ‘South Asian diasporic theatre’” (1). While his collection focuses on plays “*by and about* South Asian diasporic people” (emphasis in the original), he questions where and how we draw the boundaries when defining the field of South Asian diasporic theatre:

Does any play by or about South Asian immigrants qualify? Many plays written by people of South Asian background have nothing to do with the South Asian diaspora. What about the myriad plays written by non-South Asians that have featured South Asian diasporic roles and/or actors in production? What about all the South Asian traditions of dance, dance drama and folk performance being produced around the world? Finally, what about all the plays that have been performed in diasporic locations such as the work of Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad, or Vijay Tendulkar? (1)
Added to Bose’s list are questions of translation and adaptation, like that of Shakespeare, where productions occupy a similar liminal position to the condition of diaspora, in that they often consist of a hybrid mélange of two or more cultures.

The limited work done on South Asian American theatre has largely restricted itself to “original theatre” produced by people of South Asian descent that Aparna Dharwadker has described as “develop[ing] in the diaspora only when it distances itself from the culture of origin and embraces the experience of residence in the host culture, with all its attendant problems of acculturation and identity” (“Diaspora” 305). In contrast, the other two categories of diasporic theatre that Sudipto Chatterjee has identified—performance made by and for South Asian American communities and visiting South Asian performances—are seen as “being dependent on a sentimental nostalgia for ‘home’” (Chatterjee “South Asian” 112) where the “‘travelling’ culture of the nation” (Dharwadker “Diaspora” 305) not only provides a contemporary link to the homeland, but incorporates a central feature of the diasporic experience—the journey—into their conditions of performance. Though these forms of performance, catering specifically to diasporic communities, form the bulk of what we might call diasporic theatre in the South Asian American context, they receive minimal attention in the already limited field.114

Unlike South Asian American theatre, British Asian theatre—the name given to South Asian diasporic theatre in the UK—has a narrow but well-established tradition of theatre that is politically invested in the lived experience of diaspora in the hostland, with Tara Arts being perhaps the most prominent example of this form of theatre born out of social activism. This is,

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114 Theatre and dramatic literature also occupy a fairly small and often overlooked place in South Asian diasporic literature which has been dominated by Anglophone novelists like Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Amitav Ghosh for whom “diaspora is [often] the enabling condition but not the subject of the narrative” (Dharwadker 305).
in part, due to the longer history of South Asian immigration to England and its imbrication with a colonial past. The South Asian diasporic community in England was shaped by successive waves of large-scale immigration that provided different but discrete narratives of the relationship to both the homeland and the hostland. However, in the United States, “large-scale immigration from India is relatively recent, socially privileged, and unencumbered by colonial baggage” (Dharwadker “Diaspora” 305). For the British South Asians, therefore, the development of a tradition of performing arts was in line with the preservation and expression of the ethnic identity of their community. Given that the dramatic material produced by both these diasporic communities is seen as distinct from that produced in both the homeland and the hostland, it seems antithetical to suggest that the South Asian contributions to the festival qualify as diasporic theatre.

However, all the South Asian productions and, in fact, a number of the contributions to the larger festival might be considered a form of diasporic theatre that is built on the foundation of an extant relationship, both real and imagined, between the homeland and its dispersed satellite communities. This form of diasporic theatre occupies a marginal position relative to the Anglophone diasporic productions which make the politics and experience of diasporic life their subject matter, partly because these forms of theatre do not always follow mainstream international festival circuits and are largely in vernacular languages. However, if we are to consider the South Asian contributions to the Globe to Globe festival as exemplifying a form of diasporic theatre, what form is this and how does it move beyond diaspora as an “enabling condition” (Dharwadker “Diaspora” 305) or as mere incidental context? The answer lies in the ontological status of theatrical performance as emplaced and ephemeral. A performance takes place in a particular location for a particular audience and over a specified period of time. Our
understanding of diasporic theatre cannot be limited to the original drama produced by diasporans, but must also be extended to include productions that seek implicitly or explicitly to reach diasporic communities and to renew, instate, or interrogate the bond of nostalgia between the nation and its diaspora.

The South Asian contributions to the festival provide a pertinent example of this type of diaspora theatre because of the appeal to the paradigmatic complex diaspora. These productions drew on the “rich material culture of consumption” and shared cultural codes and referents that appealed to an audience base that spanned this complex diaspora (Werbner 76). Complex diaspora, like the ethnoheterogenous South Asian community in Britain, cannot be solely understood in terms of a nostalgic link to the nation-state that is their homeland or in terms of their marginalized position within British society. However, nor can they be considered as having a separate existence from the nation-state. This relationship between nation-state and diaspora is not limited to the construction of an abstract and imagined homeland, but rather takes material form in the global flows of capital, media, and popular culture.

The Globe to Globe festival incorporated these global cultural flows.115 Audiences were constituted largely of shifting groups of tourists, natives, immigrants, and diasporic communities. The diverse, hybrid, and imagined cultures being represented on stage drew on “large and complex repertoires of images [and] narratives” (Appadurai 35). Underpinning this festival were the global flows of finance that both determined means of travel, access to resources, and the

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115 In his book Modernity At Large, Arjun Appadurai coins five terms to describe “global cultural flows”—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes—which come together to create “imagined worlds, that is multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe” (33). For Appadurai, it is the first two—the fluid “landscapes of persons” and the “image-centred narrative based accounts of reality” (35) that function as the “two major and interconnected diacritics” of his project, or what he terms elsewhere as “media and migration” (3). Appadurai’s shifting landscapes provide us with a means of analyzing global cultural flows and can help deconstruct the functioning of a festival like the Globe to Globe.
quality of sets and props, while also setting ideological boundaries in the form of governmental sponsorship for some of the productions. Equally underpinning this festival and the Cultural Olympiad at large, was a celebration of Shakespeare as an English emblem and a simultaneous association of Shakespeare’s plays with “global concerns and . . . a form of human timelessness” while at the same time “raising questions surrounding the possible colonial echoes of an international celebration of Shakespeare designed, managed and largely enjoyed by the British” (Sullivan 7, 9).

Thus, the festival, and in particular those productions of South Asian extraction, engaged with concerns at the core of diaspora studies. First, in their inception which was informed by the dialogic relation between the nation and the diaspora, the national and the global, the universal and the particular. Second, in their construction and performance of a microcosm of diaspora space, a site that is neither the homeland nor the hostland but marks instead the zone in which the native and the diasporan interact. Third, in the representation, performance, celebration, and interrogation of national or ethnonational concerns on stage. The term desi, though central to this project’s theorization of adaptation, is used perhaps most frequently in the diasporic context to describe people, objects, and behaviors that are of South Asian extraction and, in that sense, serves as a marker of the diasporic experience—desiness is both symbolic of the homeland and is only really recognizable in the hostland. To desify, therefore, acquires a special valence in the context of this festival where the productions are performed in environments and to audiences that serve to amplify their purportedly desi features.
Reading *Piya Behrupiya* as Diasporic Theatre

Halfway through *Piya Behrupiya*, in the analogue to Act 3 Scene 1 of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Viola/Cesario attempts to deflect Olivia’s advances:

Olivia: *Kaise lage gi hum dono ke jodi?*  
What will we be like as a couple?  
Viola: *Kabhi kabhi lagta hai ki aap jo hain vo aap hain hi nahin.*  
Sometimes it appears that you are not what you seem to be.  
Olivia: *Tumhe dekhkar bhi aisa lagta hain.*  
Looking at you, this also appears to be the case with you.  
Viola: *Main jo hun vo hun nahi madam.*  
I am not what I am madam.

This line by line translation of one of the core tropes of disguise and impersonation is similarly a dominant thread running through *Piya Behrupiya*. We are frequently reminded through the performance that things and people are not what they appear to be, that, in fact, they are the very opposite of what they seem. Sebastian, in his role of *ranga* described the impending love triangle between Olivia, Orsino, and Cesario at the very outset of the play in a manner that primes us to be cognizant of these layers of impersonation and deception. Addressing a member of the audience:

\[
	extit{Zara soche madam} \quad \text{Imagine madam,}
\]

\[
	extit{ki mein love karta hoon aapko} \quad \text{that I love you}
\]

\[
	extit{Aur aap dil de bethiye} \quad \text{And you have given your heart}
\]

\[
	extit{yeh chashmewale/dariwale jan aapko} \quad \text{to this bespectacled/bearded man}^{117}
\]

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116 Olivia: Stay. I prithee, tell me what thou think’st of me?  
Viola: That you do think you are not what you are.  
Olivia: If I think so, I think the same of you.  
Viola: Then you think right. I am not what I am. (3.1.129-132)

117 How this audience member is described shifts depending on the performance. These are the two variants I have noted in the four different versions of the play I have watched.


Perhaps the most obvious example of the centrality of disguise and impersonation to this production is in the title of the piece—Piya Behrupiya or Beloved Impersonator. This title is a clear reference to Viola’s central role in disguise in this play—she impersonates her beloved brother (though she significantly does not take his name) and, in her impersonation, she creates a love triangle between the Duke, Olivia, and herself. The play also, however, engages with the phenomenon of impersonation on two other levels—first as an impersonation of Shakespeare, or rather what we expect Shakespeare to be, and second, the production is itself an extended engagement with performance or impersonation itself.

Viola/Cesario, who is both the titular character and the only one who grants us a glimpse into the deeper, melancholic side of the play, is a stranger to Illyria, and, afraid for her safety in an unknown land, disguises herself as a man and places herself in Orsino’s service, filling a gap in his “cultural department.” As a stranded foreigner with limited options, she is forced to assimilate into the society that surrounds her, adopting the gestures and outward appearance of masculinity, rehearsing the bodily movements that permit her to construct and perform a gendered identity. As she completes this transformation, the troupe sing a Chattisgarhi folk influenced song about a young, energetic boy who flaunts himself wherever he goes (Bhatt).

For the bulk of the play, therefore, we get a swaggering, betel-chewing, mustachioed, turbaned,

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118 “Piya Files,” a series on Mantra Mugdh’s podcast MnM Talkies contains a series of short interviews with the cast and creative team of Piya Behrupiya. Most informative of these is the interview with musician Amod Bhatt, who remains onstage through the entire performance. In this interview he walks us through the folk, regional, and classical influences on the songs of Piya Behrupiya.
and crude man who frequently has to catch himself from slipping out of a lower register or accidentally revealing, through close physical contact, that he is actually a woman. Halfway through the play, following Orsino’s request to deliver jewelry to Olivia, Viola/Cesario remains onstage, alone, in tears. She wipes off her mustache, undoes her hair, and sings Aaj Mere Piya Ghar Avenge—though a mournful tune, it narrates the process of getting ready for the arrival of one’s beloved—before falling asleep onstage. In an otherwise laugh-by-the-minute production, this scene tugs at the heartstrings as it reveals the vulnerable, languishing, and isolated woman behind the blustering machismo of Cesario, reminding us of the two warring identities in this figure.

Viola’s exaggerated attempts to refashion herself as a man, to assimilate into a foreign culture—even though it is not explicitly marked as such—bear a striking resemblance to the exemplary diasporic identity. To be a part of the diaspora is to simultaneously demand citizenship or belonging and to resist assimilation by the dominant culture of the homeland. It is to demonstrate an expertise in shifting between two or more distinct and seemingly mutually exclusive identities and allegiances. Performing a diasporic identity, therefore, requires an understanding of multiple cultural codes of interaction and an ability to shift between them. Like the postcolonial Hinglish-speaking Indian subject, the diasporan mixes and shifts between different bodies of cultural referents. A diasporic citizen is always in disguise, impersonating both difference and similarity, but never belonging fully. When Olivia asks Viola/Cesario where s/he is from—“Kahaan se belong karte hoon tum?—her answer—“Waise, I belong to a very good family madam, leken aaj koi personal level pe thoda disturb chal raha hain” (I belong to a

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119 In subsequent live performances this is the one moment that the production uses Shakespeare’s language as Viola recites the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter.
good family, but personally I’m a bit disturbed these days)—conveys not just the confusion surrounding her gendered identity but a broader sense of dislocation.

Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo in their essay on diaspora and performance identify three broad areas in which diaspora and performance theory might overlap—space, bodies and affect. They suggest, drawing on Butler’s theory of performance that “performative acts repeat and recite, thereby calling into being that which is being acted out.” They extend Butler’s argument about the social performance of gender to diasporic subjects where “performativity encompasses the repetition of stylized bodily acts that gives substance to notions of a bi-racialized identity, thereby suggesting that identity is not genetically determined but rather socially activated” (154). Viola enacts the “stylized bodily acts” associated with the social performance of gender, just as Olivia performs those associated with mourning and Sir Toby performs those associated with drunkenness, but the catalyst for Viola’s adoption of a masculine identity is her arrival in an unknown land and the belief that: “I’m a single girl in an unknown city/ And these are bad times.” Viola’s performance as Cesario does not explicitly map onto, nor is meant to function as an allegory for, the performance inherent in the construction and maintenance of a diasporic identity. However, in drawing attention, through comic exaggeration, to the social codes and cultural referents that form the basis of our social identity—the performance is at the very least priming us to recognize such moments outside of the theatre.

Because of Piya Behrupiya’s unusual mobility, it inhabits multiple positions, both within the national context and across a variety of diasporic contexts. Since it was commissioned by the Globe and exported from India to the festival, and then returned to India to tour, it functions along a more complex understanding of origins, thereby serving to flatten the hierarchy between

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120 Mein ladki akeli aur sheher begana/ Aur aajkal accha nahin hain zamana
nation and diaspora where the latter is seen as a “disavowed, inauthentic, illegitimate [and] impoverished imitation of the originary culture” (Gopinath 317). In her reading of bhangra music as “a diasporic cultural practice” Gayatri Gopinath puts forward “a new model of the place of the nation in diaspora: not only is the nation part of the diaspora, but the diaspora becomes (part of) the nation” (313). In other words, the nation is “redeploy[ed] as but one of many diasporic locations” (304). *Piya Behrupiya* travels on similar, if not identical, circuits, that are undergirded by the “organizational, economic, and ideological problems underpinning an art-world of multicultural festivals” (Werbner 14). What is taken as given, but never probed further is the “proposition that all culture is materially embodied and that all artists require audiences” (Werbner 14).

Shakespeare provides the channel through which these productions travel, which leads to the question of the role played by the Western canon in the field of diasporic theatre. While Bose mentions the travelling works of Dattani and Tendulkar, he does not speak of translated or adapted canonical works, despite the fact that one of the plays in the collection, Shishir Kurup’s *Merchant On Venice* does just that by rewriting Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* within the context of the Indian diasporic community in Venice Beach. In this English adaptation, Kurup “showcase(s) the internal diversities, contradictions, and conflicts of South Asian America through Shakespearean characters and conflicts, allow[ing] for South Asian American culture to appear on stage in a comprehensive fashion” (Bose 15). In this paradigmatic South Asian diasporic adaptation of Shakespeare, the conflicts of the Indian nation are displaced and worked out in a diasporic context—the umbilical link with the nation and the replication of similar hierarchies of power in the diaspora form the bedrock of this adaptation. Despite being
well received, “the actual novelty of its South Asian-ness was recognized as a liability for the play’s longevity and ability to command a wide audience” (Bose 20).

In contrast, it has been Piya Behrupiya’s Indianness or desiness that has contributed to its success. Its engagement with Shakespeare, unlike that of Merchant On Venice is not with the characters and conflicts, but rather with the idea of Shakespeare itself. It does not require a familiarity with the play Twelfth Night, but instead draws on a popular understanding of Shakespeare and what he stands for. When considering the role that Shakespeare might play in South Asian diasporic theatre, then, Piya Behrupiya utilizes a very different approach in considering not what the specific Shakespearean Twelfth Night might afford to diasporic concerns, but rather what the global cultural capital of Shakespeare affords theatre more broadly.

Figures of Shakespeare and India in Piya Behrupiya

London reviewers bemoaned the absence of Shakespearean gravitas in this performance of Twelfth Night where “the beguiling melancholy heart of the play is ignored in favour of non-stop jokes” (Gardner). What Piya Behrupiya does instead is displace this gravitas onto the figure of Shakespeare. This comic, light-hearted, and undeniably populist performance is set against an idealized version of “Shakespeare” by frequent allusions to his invisible presence as creator of the play. Thus the “authentic” or “original” Shakespeare is a ghostly presence on the stage, which both the audience and the performers are aware of. This was reinforced by the historical weight of the Globe stage, the feeling that, even if technically inaccurate, this adaptation was being performed in the very same location where the original once had been four hundred years prior. While the Globe stage provided the necessary Shakespearean context, all following live performances of the play included a backdrop with Shakespeare’s portrait. Though recognizably Shakespeare, this is not the portrait of Shakespeare we are all familiar with; this portrait
incorporates the features of the Hindu god Krishna complete with blue-tinged skin, peacock feathers, atop a lotus flower. This hybrid, colorful portrait transforms Shakespeare into a god-like figure watching over the performance, an authority that the performers turn to with increasing regularity to resolve moments of confusion, while simultaneously appropriating him as patently Indian.\(^{121}\) This literal and visual *desification* of Shakespeare’s portrait serves to mirror the linguistic *desification* of the play *Twelfth Night*: both incorporate the incremental modifications of the quotidian and commonplace.

As a consequence of having a physical manifestation of Shakespeare onstage, his name and presence was invoked more frequently in subsequent performances, with actors improvising references, irreverent comments or critiques in performance (Kumar Interview). While the “melancholy heart of the play” might have been ignored and the complex master-servant dynamic glossed over, at the heart of this production, in the exposition by the narrator/translator/Sebastian was an astute understanding of the play’s relationship to high culture and an awareness of the expectations of an audience for whom “Shakespeare” evoked all the connotations of grandeur, sophistication, and erudition. This awareness was coupled with a veiled refusal to submit to those parameters as the play continued in colloquial rhymed and multilingual verse. Thus, the performers remained, in their fun, accessible, and comic version, in opposition to the notion of an “authentic,” elite, highbrow and exclusively English Shakespeare.

While *Piya Behrupiya* takes few liberties with the basic Shakespearean plot, it appears to be directly engaging not with the play *Twelfth Night* but with an idea of Shakespeare, as an icon for a certain type of performance, as a symbol of a certain type of education, and as an example

\(^{121}\) One such instance being when Viola/Cesario claims no recollection of a love scene with Olivia (it was in fact Sebastian, her brother).
of a certain type of art. Sebastian keeps reminding the audience that they have come to see “Shakespeare” and then deliberately undercuts this with an exaggerated and melodramatic performance of a scene meant to be a comic facsimile of a more “traditional” performance of Shakespeare.

Contemporary Anglophone productions are set against or framed by an “insistent rhetoric of textual fidelity” even when the actual performance belies this objective (Worthen Studies 6). Global Shakespeare performances are similarly framed by a rhetoric that prizes a fidelity to the play’s essence. *Piya Behrupiya*, through its persistent references to the bard, brings an awareness of Shakespeare’s text to the stage. There are multiple perspectives of Shakespeare onstage simultaneously and, in critiquing the rigid, classical, orthodox view of Shakespeare, *Piya Behrupiya* provides an alternative benevolent, hybrid, and malleable Shakespeare. In several interviews, director Atul Kumar has set his experience of studying Shakespeare in school where “Shakespeare was a terror for a very long time” in stark contrast to his experience of performing Shakespeare on the contemporary Indian stage:

It was only in performance that I discovered Shakespeare and realized what a fantastic artist he is. When I actually tried to discover him within myself, within my own culture and upbringing, that is when I could relate to many things that he talks about in his plays (quoted in Shaikh).

The former—exclusively English—was bound by rules prescribing how Shakespeare should be read, interpreted, and performed:

I was terrified of Shakespeare in school and college. We were taught his texts in the most rigid way. We were also told by classical directors to speak correctly and act correctly
and, at that time, we didn’t have the courage to question what that ‘correctly’ was (quoted in Nath “Theatre”).

Piya Behrupiya performs this questioning. The “correct” mode of performing Shakespeare is insistently present in Piya Behrupiya; it is precisely what they are not doing. Declamation, recitation and precise pronunciation are replaced by physical comedy, malapropisms and a disregard for linguistic boundaries and conventions.

This mixing of languages demonstrated not only the reality of India’s hybrid linguistic landscape but also the hierarchical divisions amongst languages in the country, with the socially ambitious Malvolio comically parroting phrases, uttering several malapropisms and bumbling his way through grammatically incorrect English. Malvolio’s use of English is different from the other characters as he recites what are apparently memorized phrases and idioms: “oh my dear destiny;” “it’s a true love story;” “oh my goodness gracious me;” “beggars can’t be choosers;” “this is too much;” “calm down, calm down, breathe in breathe out.” In most situations, these words seem comically at odds with what is occurring onstage, as if Malvolio is trying to impose a certain declamatory formality on a production that clearly set itself apart from that very type of performance. He also often makes errors: “I’m a speechless”; “my apologize;” “History will repeat myself;” “Looks likes a letter”; “dodorante”(for deodorant); “Man ko sophistication de sakta hain” (Can give the mind sophistication, when he meant satisfaction). All of these instances point to Malvolio’s inability both to gauge the social interaction he is witness to, and to express himself satisfactorily in English. The most formally and austerely dressed of all the characters, in a black sherwani with a rose in its buttonhole, that stands in stark contrast to the eclectic and colorful mix of ethnic and Western clothing worn by the others, Malvolio was
perceived by some members of the Globe audience to be a remnant of the Raj and as “less Indian than the other characters” (Schafer 70).

Malvolio’s position in the production is particularly interesting when we consider its ontological status as a brash, irreverent, and versatile translation of Shakespeare—the emblem of an elite and Anglicized upper class. Malvolio’s social ambitions are directly connected with an admiration of Anglicization embodied in his mimicry that is “almost the same but [comically] not quite” (Bhabha 127). It is not because he uses English that he is mocked by the others, most prominently Maria, Sir Toby, Phool Singh, and Olivia—but rather that he attempts to use a particular form of spoken English that is outdated and at complete odds with the world that he inhabits. At one point, alone on stage, carrying Olivia’s ring for Cesario, he pompously declares, “To give or not to give that is the question,” the company behind him loudly respond “Get lost that is the answer!” Malvolio’s is not a form of English that the purportedly upper-class characters of the play employ with any great fluency; within the tightly conceived world of the play, his social pretensions do not appear to derive from or map onto any of the other characters. There is instead, an external cultural referent. If the play functions as a microcosm of contemporary Indian society, Malvolio is its most recognizable and most easily lampooned stereotype.

Subsequent performances have increased Malvolio’s English malapropisms to include those that are more recognizable with an Indian context. Malvolio is not one of the directors or teachers who held with a “correct” way of doing Shakespeare but he does share characteristics with one of their more impressionable students in his unshaking belief in the “correct” way of doing things. He desperately tries to cling to the legitimacy that “correct English” will give him, but fails simultaneously to produce that proper correct English, and to recognize that, within the
world of the play at least, the moment has passed. Malvolio, therefore, presents a foil to the speech of the other characters that have adopted, absorbed, and modified the English language, resulting in the peculiarly hybrid but eminently appropriate “Hinglish” to communicate the lived experiences and culture of a postcolonial and diverse Indian society. The desification of Shakespeare here thus comprises not just the translation of the play but also the broader shift in language to one that is more accessible, comprehensible, and modern.

Like the increased emphasis on Indian English idioms, there are several other differences in the production as it shifts between different locations of performance—both in terms of changes within the production itself and in the differing perspective of its reception. Piya Behrupiya has toured both in India and abroad, winning praise in the former for its accessibility for the lay audience as “a simplified, yet brilliant version of a Shakespearean play... with a desi twist” (Sawanti). In contrast, abroad, it has largely been described as a Bollywood musical, its frequent song-and-dance routines inspiring a comparison with the most internationally recognizable genre of Indian popular culture. It has also, recently, been filmed for television by Zee Studios in India and made available to stream on Netflix globally. Part of a fledgling project to record theatre for television, this version mutes what was most effective in a live performance of Piya Behrupiya, transforming it into an elaborate, ornate, and conventionally Indian production that more clearly slots itself into a Bollywood-style formula. These various iterations of Piya Behrupiya lead to the question of what shifts in the production between performances within the nation—where it is perceived as an alternative and accessible appropriation of Shakespeare—when it travels outside the nation—where it is perceived as an Indian or Bollywood version of Shakespeare—and when it is packaged for distribution and consumption more globally. A comparison of one of Twelfth Night’s most memorable moments in each of
these three iterations demonstrates how performance in the diaspora and in the nation, in the theatre and on film, offer different forms of freedoms and obstacles.

In Act 1 Scene 3 of *Twelfth Night* after Sir Andrew is soundly defeated by Maria in a battle of wits, he lays the blame for his lack of intelligence on his eating habits: “But I am a great eater/ of beef, and I believe that does harm to my wit” (1.3.77-8). At the Globe to Globe performance, one reviewer “was on tenterhooks for Andrew’s idiotic self-diagnosis. . . would the line. . . cause a diplomatic incident in front of an audience whose religion forbids the eating of beef?” (Smith 221) This line was retained with Andrew acting out a bull in a comic moment of charades as he could not remember the word “beef.” The production returned to this sentiment following Sir Andrew’s resolve to depart after seeing Viola/Cesario and Olivia together (roughly Act 3 Scene 2). Sir Toby challenges him, arguing that Olivia only orchestrated the scene to get Sir Andrew to act, ending his speech with: “Ab yeh baisla aap karlo ke akal badi ya bhains (You need to decide now, which one is bigger your brains or a buffalo?)”122 Andrew picks up on the word *bhains* (buffalo), its literal meaning rather than the metaphor: “Main toh beef khata hoon yaar, mere liye toh bhains hi badi hain” (I eat beef my friend, so, for me, the buffalo is bigger). Despite the fact that Andrew placed his hands on his head to mimic the horns of the buffalo and used the word beef more than once, these lines remained unnoticed by the reviewer waiting for it—“this production, travelling near the speed of light, if it used the line at all skimmed rapidly on. (I could not be sure if the line occurred)” (Smith 221).

These references to beef are entirely absent in the Zee Studio’s Netflix version. In contrast, more recent performances of *Piya Behrupiya* play up the reference to beef. The minute Andrew “confesses” he eats beef the entire company gets up and advances toward him, outraged.

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122 *Akal badi ya bhains?* is a rhetorical question that would roughly translate to brains versus brawn.
He quickly revises his statement to appease them: “Bhains ka doodh ke kheer” ([I eat] sweets made from buffalo milk). This, like references to the aadhaar card and demonetization reflects contemporary concerns that have been a central part of public debate over the past few years in India. The movement for a nationwide ban on beef has been gaining traction since the election of a BJP-majority government in 2014 and there have been several incidents since then of people from minority communities being targeted, attacked, and even killed on the very suspicion of eating beef.

Comparing moments, directorial choices, and audience reception across different iterations of the same production gives us insight into the affordances and barriers, both of medium and location. On the one hand, the ephemerality of live performance, along with a knowledge of the makeup of one’s audience, allows for more politically incendiary material. The views of the producer and the relative permanence of an online streaming version, on the other hand, resulted in more conventional choices. Equally, where these productions were being staged and for what audience also determined their identities both in terms of production choices and audience reception. The sets of the Zee Studio version are far more elaborate, setting up a visible distinction between the interior and exterior of Olivia’s house, with a painted backdrop of a ship in a storm, while not really evoking the Globe stage or Shakespeare as an omnipresent authority; the costumes are far more ornate and more explicitly traditionally Indian, retaining little of the characteristic hybridity of the Globe performance. In contrast, live performances following the first have explicitly evoked the Globe stage—bare, with two columns (or substitutes for this architecture), and with the all-seeing portrait of Shakespeare as a backdrop. The Zee Studios version seems to indicate that a domestic performance intended for a global audience incorporates more elements of recognizable Indian popular culture. Paradoxically, it is this
domestic version that most clearly slots itself into a Bollywood-style formula. In contrast, reviews of theatrical performances within the country have identified and underscored the diverse folk influences present in *Piya Behrupiya*. It is a *desified* performance of Shakespeare because it draws on the songs, popular culture, and performance tradition of a large swathe of Northern India, from Chattisgarh to Rajasthan, Maharashtra to Bundelkhand, Punjab to Bengal. For reviewers abroad, however, it is an Indian take on Shakespeare because it looks and sounds like Bollywood.

**Conclusion**

Unlike the other Shakespeare plays analyzed in this dissertation, *Twelfth Night* does not enjoy the same degree of unprecedented popularity in India. However, *Piya Behrupiya*, provides an unusually pertinent test case for the *desification* of Shakespeare for precisely this reason—there are no broad trends determining its transformation—and its inception and afterlife are informed by the tension and overlaps between the local, national, subcontinental, diasporic, and global. *Piya Behrupiya* has almost exclusively been performed on a global metropolitan circuit. In other words, its audiences have been both the most diverse and comprised of that peculiar prototype of the homogenous global citizen. This chapter thus serves to highlight the ways in which national and global perceptions of what constitutes Shakespeare, and what constitutes *desi* or Indian Shakespeare, inform, complicate, and contradict each other.

While the association between language and nationality dominated the Globe to Globe festival, *Piya Behrupiya’s* more inclusive approach to represent the soundscape of India offered a more nuanced version of this association in the contemporary Indian context. That said, the small yet frequent references to the multilingualism of India was nonetheless framed by the dominant north Indian Hindi-speaking context. Every miniscule choice that offered that nuance—in the
political, linguistic, and stylistic context—remained frequently inaccessible to or unnoticed by its audiences when set amidst the broad and familiar strokes of a “Bollywood approach” to Shakespeare. If this project suggests that the desification of Shakespeare renders visible the contemporary concerns animating the debate around Indian identity, I demonstrate that Piya Behrupiya, through its performances and reception, reflects the central tension between the competing homogenous and heterogenous visions of contemporary Indian identity.
Conclusion: Adaptation, Performance, and Desification

“Desifying Shakespeare” is primarily invested in three related questions. First, what constitutes adaptation in a postcolonial, globalized, multilingual, and multimodal environment? Second, what constitutes Indianness or desiness in the contemporary national imaginary? What are the modes and means by which a public conception of Indian identity is constructed and interrogated? Third, how do we conceive of and describe the relationship between performance—a term that encompasses both the context of the quotidian and that of the artifice of the stage and screen—and this Indianness or desiness? This dissertation uses contemporary desi productions of Shakespeare to address these questions partially because of the range, diversity, and history of Shakespearean performance in India, but, more importantly, I argue that the process of making Shakespeare Indian, or, as I have termed it, desifying Shakespeare, amplifies and engages explicitly with the three driving questions above. In the following sections I elaborate on the stakes of each of these questions both within the contours of this dissertation and beyond.

Adaptation and Desification

My first exposure to Shakespeare’s Hamlet was listening, as a young child, to the Living Shakespeare vinyl record while sitting in my grandfather’s book-lined and tobacco-scented study. As we listened to the foreign-yet-familiar accent of Michael Redgrave in the lead role and followed the dialogue in the accompanying abridged script booklet, my sister, the queen of malapropisms, christened the yellow-covered vinyl record “Omelet.” To this day, the memory I most frequently associate with that Hamlet recording is my grandfather reciting along with Michael Redgrave’s truncated version of Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy “to be or not to be” and our rather parodic tagline, one that sent us into splits as we imagined Hamlet being
confronted with the very ridiculous prospect of his father’s ghost: “Omelet Omelet, mein tera baap ka bhooth! (Omelet, Omelet, I’m your dad’s ghost!).

For me, the association of *Hamlet* with omelet evoked the much-anticipated breakfast dish of train travel, an onion, chili, and coriander filled concoction that, steaming hot, brought to mind family vacations, and the noisy, smelly and crowded space of the railway station that blended a multitude of different places and languages, where signs were misspelled and mispronounced. I don’t remember where the Hindi phrase came from, whether it was from a movie or a play or even an advertisement, a blending of high culture and the quotidian. What is significant here, though, is that the lines I most frequently associated with the play were the quintessential and infamous “to be or not to be” *and* a line that had, for all intents and purposes, no apparent association with the play: “mein tere baap ka bhooth hoon.” I never thought of that line as an “Indian version of *Hamlet*” but it was, to me, *desified*—appropriating a line from the elite and highbrow poet with all the solemnity and sense of occasion attached to it. “I am thy father’s spirit”—a revelation, a culmination of Hamlet’s hopes and fears, he sees his father once again, but this very sight confirms that something is wrong, that journey from the realm of the dead is only undertaken when something is left unfinished on earth (1.5.9). “I am thy father’s spirit” asserts the ghost. His affirmation provides the paternal authority that will undergird his directive for revenge. “Omelet, mein tere baap ka bhooth hoon” (I’m your dad’s ghost) shifts registers to one of intimate banter, a joke that is funny largely because this shift focuses instead on the sheer preposterousness of a ghost declaring to you his identity.

I have since discovered that my sister was not the first to make the association between *Hamlet* and Omelet. It is apparently a running joke in France; was one of the lines in the Reduced Shakespeare Company’s *Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*: “It is I,
Omelette the Cheese Danish!” (Long et al 74); was in the title of a popular Parsi farce of the early twentieth-century: “Hamlet no Omelet” (Marfatia); and was recently utilized by students of Sri Venkateshwara College in their adaptation which “punned on Hamlet/Omelette (in various Indian accents, Hamlet is pronounced as the egg dish)” (Multani 84). I conduct this extended and personal analysis of my own associations with *Hamlet* not to attribute any significance or universality to it, but rather as an example of the layers of references, associations, interpretations and responses that accrue around a text, particularly in a multilingual environment, and the difficulties associated with unpacking and tracing these overlaps which are no less significant because of their oral and ephemeral natures. This is what S. Shankar has referred to as the often invisible and untraceable impact of “social translation” (111).

Shakespeare has had a long multilingual and multimodal presence in India and, as Aparna Dharwadker has pointed out in her introduction to the collection *A Poetics of Modernity*, Shakespeare was one of “two dominant, almost exclusive objects of dramatic translation in India” at the turn of the twentieth century (lxix). This translation of Shakespeare, she suggests, “consisted mainly in a form of transculturation” rather than “interlingual translation” (lxvi-lxvii). Here Dharwadker distinguishes between the terms used most frequently for translation in the Indian context: “bhashantaran (literally the ‘difference’ or ‘movement’ of language), and anuvad (repetition or emulation)” with the terms for transculturation, “rupantar or rupantaram (the ‘difference’ or ‘movement’ of form; ‘changed or new form, transformation; version, rendering, adaptation’) and anuyojan (the remaking of ancient narratives or unfamiliar forms of expression through a new artistic consciousness)” (lxvi-lxvii). This distinction marks the origin of the desification of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century. Studies of Shakespearean adaptations in India thus must take into consideration the layered and complex nature of the
playwright’s presence in Indian literature, film, theatre, and education as well as the overlaps and contradictions between these forms.

In the first chapter of “Desifying Shakespeare” I suggest that the neighborhood provides a productive conceptual framework for articulating this alternative approach to adaptation studies. This approach is one where the multiple contestatory and complementary intertexts, broadly conceived and ranging from the “serious” Michael Redgrave speech to the “facetious” association of Hamlet with breakfast, have differing but equally valid impacts that inform analyses of Shakespearean adaptations.

**Defining a Des(i)**

In May 2019 the right-wing BJP government was re-elected with a massive majority in India. Put into motion almost immediately were two undertakings that stand to radically change the way in which India perceives its borders and its citizens: the fast tracking of the NRC or the National Register of Citizens in the northeastern state of Assam, and the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, stripping the region of Jammu and Kashmir of statehood. The abrogation of Article 370, an action that is yet to be deemed constitutional by the courts, has, in the name of finally incorporating Kashmir completely into the Indian nation, stripped the region of what little autonomy it had and muzzled its entire population, instituting a communications blockade that, several months later, is yet to be fully lifted.

The former, a project that had been underway well before the current government came to power, has been described as being targeted at identifying illegal immigrants in the eastern fringes of the country (read: Muslim immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh). The language used to describe these immigrants—referred to by the president of the ruling party as “termites”—and the planned internment camps for those who do not make it onto this list of
citizens draw on a rhetoric of a diseased body politic requiring a sanitized excision of infected parts (Ghoshal). This move in Assam was proclaimed by party leadership as the first step in a nationwide registry of citizens that will require people to prove their legitimate status in the country going back several generations. Critics of this plan to roll out the NRC across the country point to the particular danger of its combination with the Citizenship Amendment Act. Formally passed by government in December 2019, this act fast-tracks the citizenship process for persecuted religious minorities from three neighboring Muslim-majority countries: Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

This Act uses the veneer of human rights—it creates a special dispensation for refugees fleeing religious persecution—as a first step towards changing the demographics of a constitutionally secular India. While those Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and Christians who do not make it onto the NRC list because of a lack of documents can establish their citizenship through the CAA, the Muslims will be unable to avail of the same recourse. Working in conjunction, the NRC and CAA will require masses of people to prove, through a yet-to-be-established series of documents, their Indian citizenship, placing the onus of this process on the individual. These political events raise crucial questions for what it means to be Indian: who has the right to be treated as a citizen? Which bodies do we protect and mourn? In both cases, India is the determining legislative entity, the des, that imposes traits of inclusion and exclusion on its people. In the contemporary context, therefore, Indianness or desiness is informed by the imposition of the narrative of the des from above and the literal muzzling of the voices below. Following the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, there has been a groundswell of opposition across the nation in the form of student and women led protests, marches, and sit-ins.
These spaces have also fostered performance as a mode of community solidarity and protest that serve to counter the narrative being propagated by the political leadership of the country.

I do not mean to suggest that the productions analyzed in “Desifying Shakespeare” are representative of subaltern, silenced, or oppressed voices. These are all performances imbricated in a commercial profit-driven industry and/or the creative output of socially privileged sections of society. I argue, however, that these desified productions are not the opposite of the narratives of the des but rather in tension with them. The popular, quotidian and desified are not antithetical to larger state and societal narratives but rather engage with, negotiate, and transform a more straightforward reading as seen in those tiny moments of disquietude from Haider’s naming of home as Islamabad to Piya Behrupiya’s questioning of the beef ban.

**Performance and Desification**

In November 2016, the Supreme Court of India issued an order instructing all theatres to play the national anthem before the screening of a film and requiring all members of the audience to stand to attention for the duration of the anthem. The judgement stated: “the time has come, the citizens of the country realize that they live in a nation and are duty bound to show respect to the national anthem” (quoted in Barry). This decision obviously resulted in backlash from several corners, particularly the liberal elite, but it was also celebrated by a large percentage of the population which has begun to consider the film industry another enclave for “anti-national” activity. The valid critique that this decision ignored individual rights in the name of a performance of a ritual of nationalism was not, however, the only reason provided by critics. It is interesting to note that the bulk of the criticism rested on the belief that there was a fundamental contradiction in the inclusion of this ritual of patriotism in an environment meant for entertainment, that expressions of nationalism and the cinema somehow did not go together.
In February 2020, a section of northwestern Delhi erupted in days of communal violence. Those who lost their lives, loved ones, and livelihoods were disproportionately Muslim, and reports suggested that organs of the state stood by, watched, enabled, and even participated in these attacks. Referred to by different outlets as a riot, a pogrom, or religious clashes, it was clear that this violence was a direct result of hate speech by local BJP politicians who opposed the continuing anti-CAA protests. One of the most potent images that emerged from the coverage of these events was that of a group of broken, beaten, and bloodied men lying on the ground being *forced* to sing the national anthem while what appear to be policemen verbally and physically attacked them. In both instances, this ritualized performance of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion is externally imposed by figures of authority. However, the recent anti-CAA protests in India have included a variety of modes of performance as constitutive of protest, ranging from crowds reciting the Preamble of the Constitution in unison to spoken-word poetry to flash mobs, countering the narratives of who or what counts as *desi*. The *performance* of national identity has thus become the battleground for determining what it means in the twenty-first century to be a *desi*.

“*Desifying Shakespeare*” primarily looks at performances of Shakespeare as both constitutive and representative of these public contestations around identity, belonging, and what it means to look and sound Indian. I end with one last example that highlights both the role of performance *and* the layered and complex nature of adaptation: *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (How I Felt When I Saw that Girl) a 2019 Hindi film about a closeted lesbian Sweety Chaudhury. The climactic scene of the film involves a theatrical performance of a new play, *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, which, to the audience’s surprise is about two women and
eventually provides the platform for Sweety’s father to accept and defend her. Sahil, the playwright, conceives of his play as a dramatization of Sweety’s experiences: lonely and trapped until she meets her girlfriend Kuhu. The two effectively play themselves in the play and are being pulled apart by relatives and society at large for bringing shame on their families and Indian society, for being corrupted by Western culture. At this moment, the boundary between reality and performance blurs and Sweety’s father Balbir (who had earlier forbidden her from performing) rushes on stage to defend her from the abuse and violence surrounding her. What follows is an impassioned speech on universal and natural love—Balbir’s perspective has been changed by the performance. This film was released a year after the decriminalization of homosexuality in India and the concluding scene of a theatrical performance as an imperfect yet effective means of changing public perception mirrors the larger conversation that the film is engaged in.

_Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga_ is not desified Shakespeare in the strictest sense. Though inspired by P.G. Wodehouse’s _A Damsel in Distress_, the title of this film comes from one of the most popular songs of the 1994 film, _1942: A Love Story_, describing the moment that the male protagonist, Naren, first encounters Rajjo. This is a film that also contained a theatrical performance—_Romeo and Juliet_—that mirrored the relationship of its protagonists.¹²³ Like _Romil and Jugal_, the webseries about a gay couple, _Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga_ engages with the tradition of _Romeo and Juliet_ in Indian film. Shakespeare, here, is one of many reference points in conceiving of and representing changing desi attitudes toward love. Shakespeare is also one of many reference points in making sense of the function and power of

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¹²³ Incidentally, Anil Kapoor who plays Naren, the central role in _1942: A Love Story_, plays the father Balbir in _Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga_ alongside his daughter Sonam Kapoor as Sweety Chaudhuri.
performance, both in terms of constituting and shaping identity and in terms of changing it. This example, along with the many others in this dissertation, demonstrates not just the ubiquitous presence of Shakespeare in Indian film and theatre, but rather the complex, layered, and multifarious nature of this presence: both text and performance, both education and entertainment, both English and vernacular, both foreign and desified.
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